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No. 112.

BEADLE'S

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POCKET

NOVELS



The Crossed Knives. ¹/₂



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THE
CROSSED KNIVES;
OR,
THE ISLAND LEAGUE.

A ROMANCE OF THE GREAT NORTH LAKE.

BY W. J. HAMILTON,

AUTHOR OF THE FOLLOWING POCKET NOVELS:

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|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| No. 13. THE FRENCH SPY. | No. 102. WILD RUBE. |
| No. 30. EAGLE-EYE. | No. 110. NICK, THE SCOUT |

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THE CROSSED KNIVES.

CHAPTER I.

THE THREE CROSSED BLADES.

"We swear!"

Scene, a small island not far from the mainland upon that vast lake, Superior—in the northern wilds of Minnesota, a vast expanse of country, rich in precious and useful metals—how rich no man knows.

"We swear!"

The solemn words seemed to pierce the arches of the grand old woods with marvelous distinctness. The dreadful earnestness in the tone of the speakers left no doubt upon the mind that they meant what they said.

Three strong men they were—types of three different nationalities, we might say of four—for one of them was a half-breed Sioux. They stood upon the little island, which was scarcely two hundred rods in circumference, nothing more than a rock protruding from the water, three hundred yards from the mainland.

The men were grouped in a circle, each with his right foot advanced and his right arm extended, grasping a bright bowie, the three blades crossed above their heads, forming an arch of steel. The one who seemed fitted by nature for the leadership of the party was perhaps thirty years of age, with a handsome face, deep blue-black hair and flashing eyes, out of which, when he was angry, a cruel devil looked. He was tall, fully six feet, and every limb and muscle bespoke the possession of tremendous strength. His name was Gaston Foix, of French descent, although he seldom spoke the language.

The next in order was the half-breed, a man more slightly built than Foix, but in whose wiry frame dwelt a power of endurance which had brought him off conqueror from many

a bloody fray. This man was marked by a peculiar scar in the form of a crescent, which crossed his high forehead and gave it a strange, distorted appearance.

The third was an older man than either the half-breed or Foix, about whom there could be no doubt. Steeped in crime, he was not one to hesitate when interest made crime necessary—the sort of person who settles all difficulties with a bullet and always manages to fire first. His name was Buck Bracer, or so he was known upon the border.

“We stand under the arch of steel,” said Gaston Foix, in a clear, mellow voice; “and here I repeat the oath.”

“We three, solemnly swear, under the triple arch, that we will never reveal to any, be he whom he may, the secret of this island; that we will oppose in every way, even to the death, the approach of other persons; that we will guard and keep this secret faithfully, and if we should fail in this, the traitor meets the doom of knife or bullet, in a brother’s hand. We swear!”

“We swear!” repeated the other two, solemnly. The arch of steel was broken and each one pressed his lips upon the blade.

“And now that this is done, Cap,” said Buck Bracer, “I want to ask if we are to keep this as much a secret from the boys as the rest of the world?”

“From all men, no matter who they may be,” replied Foix. “We three are masters of the secret and we must retain it.”

“That is good,” said the half-breed. “Why should we, who have been lucky, share our luck with others who have passed the spot a hundred times and never dreamed of the secret? They call me Black Wolf in the settlements. Bah; I am a wolf, and like a wolf I will defend this secret. Beware that neither of you forgets.”

“Don’t raise on yer hucks on my account,” said Buck Bracer. “I ain’t sech a nat’ral fool that I’d tell any one. No, no, my bully boys; I’ll fight fur the secret till the teeth meet in the flesh and nothing but death kin make me loose my hold. You hear *me*.”

“I hear you,” said Foix, quietly. “Fewer words might perhaps have been used, but that does not matter now. I

am of the opinion that our secret is safe here, and if it is not, we will make it so. The land will be mine soon, for I will buy it of the United States agent to-day."

"Yours, did you say, Foix?" said Buck, quickly. "Ain't we in it, then?"

"What do you care for so many acres of barren land, if you get the cream of the soil?" said Gaston. "I shall buy it in my own name, of course. By the way, I got in a little quarrel down to Hunt's, yesterday."

"Did it come to a fight?"

"They parted us or one or the other of us would have got his billet. The young fellow was a stranger to me, and we got to talking in the the bar-room about wrestling, and I said I could put any man in the State of Minnesota on his back. Would you believe it, boys, he was eager for a throw, and that old guide, Jesse Turner, was foolish enough to bet fifty that the young fellow could throw me."

"The durned fool! And he knowed you, too. You raked in their fifty, then?"

"No."

"Why; didn't ye wrestle?"

"Yes; but the boot was on the other leg. The young fellow threw me over his hip on top of my head, and nearly broke my neck. *Sacre!*" hissed Gaston, dropping into a French execration before he thought. "I'll remember him for it."

"He throwed you? Then I'll be kinder keerful how I tackle him. What sort of a looking chap is he?"

"Rather good-looking, brown hair and eyes, about five feet eleven in high, well set up, and wears a hunting-suit of gray cloth. Ever seen him?"

"No."

"It don't matter. I shall meet him some day when there is no one nigh to take his part. I'd have given it to him as it was, only Jesse covered me with his repeater and I had to cave. Let's go on shore and set up the cabin."

The men had a canoe, and entering it, the half-breed took up the paddle and quickly sent them over the intervening space to the shore. It was a wild, rocky coast, the shores lined with heavy timber which as yet had been but little as-

sailed by the woodman's ax. The three men set to work and in an hour or two had built a very creditable bush shanty, something which would do very well until they were able to put up a better. This done, and leaving the Indian in the hut, Gaston Foix and Bracer started for the little settlement, not more than five miles distant. Passing through the woods they came to a little circular opening, in the midst of which a fire was blazing and two hunters had made a camp.

"Hold on," said Gaston Foix, drawing a deep execration through his set teeth. "I'll be cussed if that is not the young man who threw me."

"And there is old Jessie Turner, too," said Bracer. "I don't keer to meet him jest now 'cause he hurt my feelings the last we met."

"How?"

"He called me a durned thief!"

"Did he carry the enormity so far as to *prove* it?" said Gaston, quietly. "Come, old fellow; you know well that your character is not much above par in this section."

"I'll git even with old Jess Turner, yet," growled Bracer.

"No better time than the present, for I am aching to get a shot at that fellow with him, and I'll leave Jess to you."

"I ain't *heeled* just now," said Bracer. "If I was I'd mount him like the besum of destruction. I'd rip his intrails out, so to speak."

"You are little better than a coward, my good friend," said Gaston. "I wish I had brought Wolf with me and then I should have a backer. Come on."

He strode out into the opening, and the two men at the fire looked up and grasped their rifles. They did not relinquish them when they saw the ill-omened pair, but rose quickly, each with his finger on the trigger.

"Keep yer seat—keep yer seat," said Bracer, who did not like these hostile demonstrations. "We ain't on the fight, Jess."

"I orter lam ye in the jaw!" replied the hunter he called Jess. "I'd orter knock ye all full of little holes, you son of a skunk."

"Now, what's the matter, Jess?" said Bracer, pleadingly. "Ain't I on the square with you, nowadays?"

"No you ain't, you missable trap-thief!" replied Jess. "I'm of a peaceful natur' or else I'd alter the shape of yer mouth."

The younger man has been already described by Gaston, but the speaker is worth a description. He was taller than Gaston Foix but more slender, although it was evident that the covering of his bones were muscle and sinew. There was a quick, panther-like grace about his movements which proclaimed him a desperate enemy. But his face! Ye gods, was there nothing to relieve its unapproachable homeliness? His hair was of that dirty sandy color which always looks mean and frowsy, his eyes were slits in the flesh and from his forehead to his chin freckle overlaid freckle in a ridiculous manner. It was impossible to say how old he was; light complexioned men never show their age. His hands, which were of tremendous size, worked nervously as he picked at the lock of his rifle.

"Don't let us querrel, Jess," said Bracer; "I don't feel right about that ar', somehow."

"You'll feel a cussed sight worse ef I go for ye," growled Jess Turner. "A man! *You* ain't a man but a low-born thoroughbred skunk of misfortune. You'd steal a cart-wheel—you'd steal a mule's tail unlest you could steal the hull of him. Tell me suthin' you wouldn't steal, you wanderin' muskrat thief and 'possum of iniquity."

"Will you stand abuse like that and never lift a hand?" hissed Foix. "Out steel and into him, and I'll do the same by his friend."

"I'm afeard of Jess Turner," whined Buck Bracer. "He's a live alligator, Jess is, and I'm afeard he'd make me hunt my hole. Let's go away from 'em."

"I am sorry, gentlemen," said Gaston Foix, "that my companion is not disposed to resent the insults you have heaped upon him. If it had been my own case, your evil-lent desire for a quarrel would not have been baffled I assure you."

"Devil doubt you, Gaston Foix," said Jess Turner. "You may be all right but you ar' in cussid bad kumpeny, and a

man is known by the kumpeny he keeps. Looke hyar, Buck Bracer; the next time I meet ye I'm going to wear out a fathem of strong lariat on yer back. Now don't finger yer knife but dror it like a man."

Buck Bracer dropped his hand and looked savagely at the speaker but did not utter a word.

"May I ask your name, sir?" said Foix, turning suddenly upon Jess Turner's companion, who had not spoken but stood smiling while Jess insulted Buck Bracer.

"Certainly; my name is Wallace Burton."

"Wallace Burton, eh? Mine is Gaston Foix, and we shall have an accout to settle some day."

"Any day you like; now, if convenient to you."

"No; let us put it off for a while, if you have no objections. Jess Turner can tell you that I am not a coward, and when I promise fairly to meet you he knows that I will keep my word. One thing more, I have not forgotten or forgiven the fall you give me at Hunt's."

"Oh, go 'long!" said Jess Turner. "You'd better leave the boy alone fur I tell ye he's chain lightning pizened with brimstun."

"I am not afraid of him," replied Foix. "Come on, Bracer, unless you want to stare at the man you dare not meet for an hour or two more."

The two men went on through the opening, and Jess Turner stole after them until satisfied that they did not mean to return. Then he came back thoughtfully to the fire.

"I will own that I am puzzled that you should attempt to quarrel with these men now, Jess," said the young man.

"I've got a reason," responded Old Jess, grimly, "and the time ain't fur off when I'll hev to wipe out that vision of sin that calls hisself Buck Bracer. For why? Didn't he insult my little gal t'other day 'cos thar was no one nigh to help her? But, durn his hide, she hed a pistol, and the way she made him dig for high timber was just a sin."

"Your girl! I did not know you had a family."

"Ain't I? Ef I don't show you the likeliest gal in Minnesota, then I don't know a rifle from a toothpick. She's my gal, she is, and no darter ever loved a humbly old cuss more'n sh: duz me. You needn't ask me no questions 'bout

her, 'cos I ain't goin' ter answer ef ye do. I'll let her speak for herself."

"You'll introduce me, however?" said Wallace.

'Yaas; I trust you, becos ef you ain't a true man then I don't want no more to do with human natur'. Come on; it's a good four mile to my cabin."

They took up their well-filled game-bags and started off through the woods, taking the same direction followed by the two who preceded them. Both were good walkers and in something more than three-quarters of an hour they came in sight of the cabin of Jess Turner, where that worthy stopped with a snarl like that of a wild beast, his whole countenance working with rage. The young man was astonished at the change which had taken place in a single moment in the open face of the hunter.

"Don't tech me," he hissed. "I'm so mad I could bite a griddle in two. Hold on till I fodder my shooter."

"What are you going to fire at?" said Wallace.

"Look thar!" said Jess, pointing toward the cabin. Wallace looked and instantly took up his own rifle, while Jess as rapidly loaded and brought his piece to a level. His keen eyes never failed when they looked through the double sights.

CHAPTER II.

MAUDE TURNER.

THEY were on the right of the cabin, screened by the thick bushes, and perhaps a hundred yards distant so that they could see all that was going on within the clearing. Just on the threshold, barring the doorway, stood a beautiful young girl, her black curling hair floating about her beautiful form like a mantle. Her luminous eyes were flashing scornfully as she barred the door against Buck Bracer, who stood leering before her.

"You'd better let me in, little gal," he said, "acause when

my anger blazes up thar is no telling what I may do. I'm a raving maniac, them times."

"You are not coming in here, sir," retorted the girl. "Don't think that I am afraid of you, for I know your cowardly nature."

"But you don't know me, gal. I'm a new man now, and in a few weeks I'm a-going to buy up the hull State of Minnesota. I kin do it, easy as falling off a log. Don't be so hash with the richest man in the State—don't."

"You must go away from here," said the girl. "If my father should come back you would move quickly."

"But he ain't coming back, my darling," persisted Bracer, attempting to force his way in. "Come; don't be foolish, for I want to talk to you. You don't believe I'm rich, now, maybe. I don't look it, that's a fact, but I am—I'm one of the richest men in this yer State, and I want to marry you. I do, by lightning."

She raised her open hand and struck him sharply in the face. He staggered back, uttered a fierce oath and forgetting that she was a woman raised his hand to strike in return. The eyes of Old Jess were flashing through the double sights and Bracer was nearer death than he had ever been before, when a new champion appeared, in the person of Gaston Foix, who darted suddenly from the other side of the house and without stopping to ask questions struck Bracer a blow under the ear which landed him on the turf ten feet away with a **sounding crush**.

"Take that, you low-lived scoundrel," cried the assailant. "What do you mean by insulting a lady in my presence?"

Bracer was knocked completely sober, drunk as he was the moment before. He sat up with a mournful expression on his face and looked at his companion in wonder and doubt.

"What's that, Gaston?" he said. "I've bin hit by a young 'arthquake, I reckon."

Gaston laughed lightly and turned to Maud Turner. "You must excuse him, Miss Turner," he said, with quiet politeness, "for you see that he was so very drunk he does not know what hurt him. If I had known it I should not have struck so hard."

"I thank you for the blow, sir," she replied, "for I think that the ruffian would have killed me, he was so angry. But he insulted me, and I struck him before I thought."

"Yes; you only gave him his just dues, the blackguard. I will teach him better manners before long, or I will know the reason why. My name is Foix—Gaston Foix; perhaps you have heard of me."

"I think I have, sir. Is not Jennie Carroll your cousin?"

"Yes," he said, smiling. "Do you know Jennie, then? She is a good girl, although her cousin is not much to brag of."

"She has spoken highly of you, sir, and I am glad to meet you, although our introduction has been somewhat informal. Will you walk in?"

"You must excuse me," said Gaston. "I have this rascal to take care of, but at some other time I will take pleasure in accepting your kind invitation. I am glad an opportunity has arisen to be of service to you. Here, Bracer; come along."

"That 'arthquake knocked me sensible," muttered Bracer.

"It has performed a miracle, then," replied Gaston, laughing. "I did not suppose any shock could have done that. But come along; I've got a bone to pick with you."

He caught Bracer by the collar and dragged him to his feet and bowing to Maud crossed the opening, still leading Bracer by the collar. They disappeared in the deep wood and Maud turned back into the cabin with a strange flush upon her beautiful face.

"Who is this Gaston Foix, and why, when I look at his face, does it alternately attract and repel? Why do I think of him in this way, after the first meeting? I never saw a more handsome face in man, and yet there is something in it which I can not understand and which I do not like. I wish Jennie would come; I would like to talk to her."

At this moment, the barking of a dog and the rattle of hoofs, mingled with a shrill hurrah, announced a new-comer, and Maude, with a delighted cry, ran to the door and flung it open. A strange girl was coming across the opening at a mad gallop, with a deer-hound running by her side, leaping up and barking. She was young—perhaps twenty years of

age—with a piquant, happy, reckless face, brimful of fun and reckless daring. Her hair was short and of a reddish hue, and curled in obstinate rings about her shapely little head. Her dress was something like the Bloomer costume, and her right heel was adorned by a bright spur which had evidently been used.

"Hurrah, Maud!" she cried, swinging herself lightly from the saddle. "Here I come like the bad penny which always returns. What does Jen Carroll care what the world thinks of her? I know my own heart, and if I can defend myself when I am insulted that is *my* look-out. And if I choose to ride a horse man-fashion, instead of riding with my knee in my mouth, as these side-saddle girls have to do, *that* is my business too."

"Are you angry, Jennie dear?" said Maud.

"Angry? No, I don't know that I am angry—but I met Rodney Phelps just now, and he said, 'How do you do, *Mr.* Carroll?'; and I said, 'How are *you*, Miss Nancy?' and rode on, sticking in my spur to get away from him as quick as I could. Oh—I could tear him all to pieces!"

To the uninitiated this young lady would have seemed to be angry. Her eyes flashed fire, and her fingers twitched convulsively.

"Keep cool, Jennie," said Maud, "or I shall think you care more about Rodney than you are willing to allow."

"Care for him! I was tempted to lay my whip across his impudent face. I will do it, too, if I meet him again, and he dares to say *Mister* to me. There!"

"He is impudent, dear; but then, he is a brave, good fellow, and loves you, after all."

"Because I choose to ride a horse in a sensible manner," cried Jennie, returning to her grievance, "is it any of *his* business? It always makes me angry to see a girl riding with a side-saddle—the most ridiculous, awkward—Ugh! I wish I could meet Rod Phelps, now. I'd give him a piece of my mind."

"I saw your cousin this morning, Jennie."

"What! Gaston?" cried Jennie.

"Yes; tie your horse and come in and I will tell you about it."

"I'll take him into the stable, thank you. Cub and I are good friends, and have passed many a happy hour in each other's company, if I *do* ride man-fashion. Urrrrh! How mad it makes me when I think of Rod Phelps. *Mister Carroll!* I could tear his eyes out!"

She led her horse, a noble black, over sixteen hands high, marked with a white star in the forehead, into the stable and gave him a feed. Maud accompanied her, and the two came back intertwined in girlish fashion, talking merrily of the strange introduction of Gaston Foix.

"I like him," said Jennie, vivaciously, her gray eyes flashing with enjoyment. "He is handsome and polite, and oh—so delightfully wicked! Say what you will, Maud, we girls like a man who has a spice of the devil—excuse the word—in his composition. I am of age—I can speak for myself, and I say that this is true."

"But you say that Mr. Foix is wicked. When you say that, what do you mean?"

"I mean what I say. He is wicked, wicked, wicked! He plays poker and always wins. He rides like a centaur—you see I have not forgotten my Ancient History—and dances like an angel. He can play any instrument from a jews-harp to an organ, and any game from push-pin to King Faro. And, last not least—he knows how to talk to a woman."

"But, Jennie, this not like you. I am sure you can not uphold any one so vicious as you say your cousin is."

"Who says he is vicious? He is a darling and can shoot—why—he taught me to shoot and I can snuff a candle at twelve paces with a common Derringer. What do you say to that? Oh, crickey! There comes your father and a fellow with a mustache. *Isn't* he a duck? Who is he—who is he? Why don't I know him, with such a mustache as that? Tell me his name, quick!"

"Be quiet, you madcap," said Maud. "I don't know who he is."

Old Jess advanced at a swinging pace with his rifle in the hollow of his arm, and a broad grin irradiating his face.

"Ef thar ain't my little Tom-boy, Jennie Carroll," he cried. "See yer, youngster, ef you want to know a gal that kin outshoot, outrun and outride any man in Minnesoter

hyar is the identickle little cuss. How ar' you, Jennie; yer welcome as the flowers in May."

"I thought so, uncle Jesse," replied the girl. "But are you not giving me a strange introduction to this gentleman?"

"This hyar is Walter Burton, and he's a chicken, ef ever there was one in the created world. Why, he throwed that mean cuss, Gaston Foix, so quick that—but I forgot he was yer cousin."

"Father," said Maud, quickly, "Mr. Foix has just done me a service and I wish you'd speak more kindly of him."

"I see'd it all," said Jess, "but it won't work on me. Why, gal, I had my rifle up to my shoulder, and ef Buck Bracer had hit ye, he'd 'a' bin the deadeest man you ever saw in about half a minnit. Don't you have nothing to say to Gast Foix. Wallace, this is my gal, Maud. Didn't I tell ye the truth?"

"More than the truth, Mr. Turner," replied Wallace, shaking hands with Maud and giving her a look of honest admiration from his big brown eyes. "I am glad that I happened to meet you and take up my quarters with you."

"Let's go into the house. While Wallace and me have a talk, gal, see ef ye kain't raise suthing in the shape of grub. I want a bite dreadful bad. Who hez see'd any thing of Rod Phelps lately?"

"What do you want of him, uncle?" asked Jennie.

"I want him to run out some land for Mister Burton. He's the only surveyor worth his salt about hyar, and—"

"Now Petlar Gray went trading West,
For furs and other skins;
When he was shot, scalped and bur-ri-ed—
By the blood di In-ji-ins!"

A manly tenor voice trolled out this mournful ballad, a swinging step stirred up the forest leaves, and a young fellow broke out of the thicket close at hand, his rifle on his back and a well-filled game-bag swinging beside it.

"Hip, hip, hip!" roared Old Jess. "Ef thar ain't the very critter we want."

"Come into the house, quick!" cried Jennie. "I don't want to see him."

"Lost, strayed or stolen," chanted the new-comer, singing the words through his nose; "a small boy of the name of

Carroll. Red hair, gray eyes, lively tongue. Rides with a high Mexican saddle and a single spur. Has a gift of the gab werry rapid, and—"

"Found I!" roared Old Jess. "Rod Phelps, my boy, I'm mighty glad to see you."

"Same to you, old man. I'm been tramping after game, other employment failing, and I thought I'd come this way. Did you want any thing particular of me?"

"A little job of surveying."

I'm your gooseberry; trot out your job and let me tackle it."

While he is unstrapping his game-bag let us take a look at this border surveyor. He is rather below the medium hight, with powerful shoulders and well-shaped limbs. His face, framed in russet brown beard and mustache, is manly and honest. The curl in his upper lip and the twinkle in his blue eyes bespoke a nature full of humor. In short he was a perfect specimen of the borderman, quick on the trigger, but ready to do the fair thing by every man.

"The girls have dug out," he said, as he threw the game-bag on the ground. "Did you ever see such a little devil as Jennie Carroll? And yet, stranger, I'd like to see the man, big or little, that would dare insult her when Rod Phelps is by."

"This is Mr. Wallace Burton, of York State," said Jesse, "and he's one of your sort too, Rod. A high old boy—he is—a regular out and outer. He's the man that wants you to do a job of work."

"Where is it?" queried Rod Phelps.

"Section forty; up nigh the lake."

"Section forty? Have you got your papers all right, Mr Burton? Because if you have not I'd recommend you to be mighty quick about it for there is a man squatting on that section that is hot to take up the land. He told me day before yesterday that he was going to buy it in to-day."

"Who is it?" demanded Jesse.

"I thought you knew that. It is Gaston Foix, and if there is a dirty scoundrel on the face of the earth he is the man. I don't care if he is Jennie's cousin; he is a low thief all the same. Have you got your fast mustang yet, Jesse?"

"Bet yer life."

"Then stick Mr. Burton on his back and tell him to ride like blazes and get his claim registered before Foix can get there. He is on the way now."

"Out with the horse!" cried Wallace. "Waste no time for Heaven's sake."

Two minutes after, Wallace, mounted on a noble black mustang, was flying like the wind across the opening, while the two bordermen watched him admiringly as he dashed away. "He'll do for the border, Jesse," said Phelps. To whom Old Jess responded—"Bet yer life!"

CHAPTER III.

A BORDER SCRIMMAGE.

GASTON FOIX and Buck Bracer left the opening in an attitude of enmity, and for half a mile the former still clutched him by the collar, giving him a shake now and then and looking fiercely at him. But, when once satisfied that they were no longer observed, he dropped his hand and burst into a hearty laugh.

"I think I may safely say that we played that well, Buck," he said. "It fooled the girl, anyhow, and doubtless she looks upon me as a sort of knight errant sent especially to rescue distressed damsels. I came very near laughing at the expression of her face. But, *isn't* she a beauty, though? And have I not made a worthy choice?"

"You always get the best of every thing," grumbled Buck. "I don't stand no show, so to speak. Every time you draw to aces you fill and I can't get any pair, somehow. I'd like that girl myself."

"You are a modest kind of thief," said his friend, stopping short, and looking at Bracer with an evil expression. "You are a nice sort of duck to talk of marrying such a girl as Maud Turner. Was that what you meant by your talk about buying up the State of Minnesota?"

"Nun ov yer business," replied the man, in a sulky tone. "You think I ain't nobody, don't ye? You kin have yer own way *all* the time, I reckon. What did you hit so hard fur? You've r'ised a lump on my face as big as a potato."

"I had to keep up appearances," replied Gaston.

"Appearances? Thunder and lightning! Don't say that ag'in or I'll git mad. You let out at me as though I was your mortail enemy."

"Don't say any more about that, but step out as quickly as you can. I want to buy up that section at once, for some one might take a fancy to it and get ahead of me."

"Why don't you hev *all* our names put in the claim? It don't seem fair, somehow, and ef you was to play roots on us we wouldn't stand no show."

"Shut up; you haven't got the whisky out of your skin yet or I wouldn't take any nonsense from you about that little matter. If I played you false, you could let a thousand saen in on my claim in half a day."

"How much do you think there would be left when I—Whar's that boss gallopin'?"

They were within three miles of the village of Hunt's, and a horseman was galloping upon the outer edge of the piece of timber through which their path led, and before they passed it he had gone over the ridge between them and the village. Half an hour later the two men entered the village and made for the "Land Agent's" office.

The Land Agent in a western town is a great man. Generally he is a capitalist, and lends small sums to bordermen who can give him his security and twenty per cent bonus. He has land in all unoccupied portions of the State, and is always ready to plant a new settler somewhere.

The Agent was in his office, seated at his desk—a spare-visaged man, with mutton-chop whiskers, iron-gray hair, and a determined-looking mouth.

"Six hundred and forty acres at three-fifty," he muttered, shuffling some papers on the desk; "twenty two hundred-forty. Cost me eight hundred. 'Um, umpa; good interest enough. The young man was rather hot to buy, or he might have made a trifle. But, impatience never pays—never—never. Now here comes another man in a devil of a hurry

Make him pay for it. 'Um, umph. Oh yes. Good-morning, sir; morning, morning. Fine day, eh? Oh; it is Mr. Foix."

"I've come upon a trifle of business, Mr. Ryan. I hear you've got some land up here on the lake shore."

"'Um, umph! Oh yes; plenty of land—plenty—plenty of land. Sold a section this morning up there. 'Um, umph. Oh yes; sold it cheap."

Gaston tried to look at his ease, for he was rather low in funds, and he feared that any haste upon his part would induce the Land Agent to "size his pile." He seated himself on an office stool and looked at the maps, while Buck Bracer squirted tobacco-juice into the sand-boxes, and looked with a swaggering air at the Land Agent.

"What is land worth up there now?" asked Gaston.

"Worth more than it will bring, my boy, far more. Mineral lands along the lake—copper, silver, gold—heaps."

"Pshaw! I'd like to see the minerals?"

"They are there, though," persisted the agent. "That section I sold this morning has copper on it or I'm a Dutchman—Dutchman—big-headed Dutchman."

"I wish I had bought that section," said Foix, affecting a laugh, although sick with fear. "Who bought it?"

"Young man named Burton—Wallace Burton. Fine young man, new settler, just what we want. Grow up with the country, you know."

The agent seemed determined not to make any advances, and Foix was obliged to do so.

"I've looked over a section up here by the Lake," he said, "and it will suit me well enough if we can agree to the price; that is the main thing."

"Where is that land?"

"Section forty."

The face of the Land Agent assumed a queer expression as he folded and unfolded the paper on his desk.

"Wouldn't some other land suit you just as well, Mr. Foix?"

"No; I want that or none."

"Is this the same land you talked with me about some weeks ago?"

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"Yes."

"Then you are too late, altogether too late. Land's gone. Should have bought it before."

"Gone?" shrieked the would-be land-owner, springing to his feet. "Gone! What are you talking about? It cannot, shall not be sold to any man except myself. I will kill any man who buys that land from under me."

"I tell you it is sold already—sold already," replied the agent. "Here are the papers, the papers. Young man left them while he went up to the hotel, because he trusted me, trusted me."

"Are those the only papers which hold that land?"

"Yes."

"Listen to me, Ryan; I want that section; I must and will have it. There are no witnesses against you if you destroy those papers and make out others in my name."

"What for?"

"I will give you my note for ten, twenty, fifty thousand dollars if you will do it. And as a sign that I mean business, I will pay you five thousand cash on the nail."

Ryan looked at him sternly for a moment and a cold glitter came into his eyes. The temptation, great as it was, did not move this genuine man of business an inch. He pushed the proffered notes aside with his open palm.

"Take up your money—your money, Mr. Foix. This is a matter of business, business, and I don't agree to it. I've sold this land—Wallace Burton is the buyer; Jacob Ryan is the seller. The consideration is paid in hand and is my price. If you buy, buy from owner, Wallace Burton. This is business. Oh, yes."

"See here, Mr. Ryan," said Foix, in a threatening tone. "A great deal depends upon the way you treat me in this matter. I want those papers burned and it shall be done."

"Guess not, not; oh no!"

With a quick bound Gaston flung himself half-way over the desk of the Land Agent and made a grab at the papers. Mr. Ryan was as quick as he, and the papers went back over his shoulder within the railing out of Foix's reach. Placing his hand upon the rail he was about to leap over when he was met by the apparition of a revolver pointed at his head.

"Domino," cried the Land Agent. "On the double six! Game blocked; oh yes."

Gaston started back and seemed about to draw a weapon, but the stern voice of the Land Agent was heard:

"Throw up—up, or I'll shoot. Go about your business business."

"Put up your pistol, Mr Ryan," said Foix, as he raised his hands. "You've got the best of the game, that I allow, but it don't make any difference. You've sold that land and I've a sort of claim on it, and I *won't* give it up. I'll give you a hundred per cent on any price you pay this Wallace Burton below twenty thousand dollars, for that six hundred and forty acres he bought of you."

"Now you talk," said Ryan. "I'll buy it, buy it, if I can—can. This is better than pistols."

At this moment the door opened and Wallace Burton walked in.

"I've come for my papers, Mr. Ryan," he said, with a side glance at Foix and Bracer. "I am in some haste as I wish to ride back to Jesse Turner's before supper-time."

"Here are your papers, papers," said the agent. "Wait a moment, Mr. Burton. You have got in the way—in the way of this gentleman, and he wants, wants to buy you out."

"I don't want to sell."

"But see here," said Foix, starting forward, impulsively. "I've got a sort of claim there, I and my mates. We've built a cabin and have got used to the place, and for that reason we don't want to be driven out."

"You are welcome to stay as long as you behave yourselves."

"That won't suit me," said Gaston, with a lowering brow. "I stay upon no man's land by sufferance. If I can not have the land by paying for it, I don't want it at all."

"In that case you will have to get along without it," said the young man, who was looking over his papers. "I want this land, and mean to keep it."

"Ten thousand dollars; I'll give you ten thousand dollars."

"It won't do; in fact, I have a reason of my own for wishing to examine this land carefully. If, after I have exam-

lined it, I conclude that it will not suit my purpose, you or any other man will be welcome to it at the price I gave. That ought to be enough, Mr. Foix."

"I'll give you more."

"It won't do, I say. Mr. Ryan, I trust to you that these papers are all right. No one can dispossess me of my right can they?"

"No; all safe, all safe."

"Enough; I'll be off to Jesse Turner's."

He threw open the door and they saw the black mustang standing there. Both men understood how he had got to the land-office before them. Foix followed him out on the steps.

"I don't know whether you are a coward or not, Mr. Burton, but this is the way we try men's souls on the Minnesota border."

As he spoke, he raised his hand and struck the young man sharply in the face. The next moment he landed on the sward, shot out from the steps by a blow straight from the arm-pit, full of muscular force.

"And that is the way we answer it in New York," shouted Wallace.

"I call all here to witness," cried the young man in a clear voice, "that this quarrel was forced upon me against my will. I have no quarrel with this man, except that I have bought fairly a piece of land which he seems to covet."

"All right, all fair," said Mr. Ryan. "Served him just right, just right. Hit him again if he comes at you."

"You are a friend, though an odd one," said Wallace, with a smile, as Gaston Foix began to pick himself up, with a discoloration beginning to show itself upon his forehead, where the hard fist of Wallace Burton had alighted.

"You won't refuse to fight," he said, hissing the words through his set teeth. "You dare not, if you mean to stay upon the border."

"I dare not, eh? I dare do even that, the hardest thing for a brave man to do—bear the stigma of a coward. I will not fight a duel with any man, but if you or any of your gang *attack* me, guard yourselves. I defy you, and will stay in Minnesota in spite of you."

The lookers-on, rough bordermen for the most part, who had gathered eagerly at the chance of a fight, shook their heads solemnly. To them it seemed almost a crime to refuse to fight a duel, and they began to lose confidence in Wallace Burton.

"My friends," he cried, turning to them, "I see by your faces that you do not like it that I refuse to fight. My father, as brave a man as ever trod the earth, was killed in a duel, and I promised my mother on her death-bed never to fight a duel or take the life of any man except in fair combat, to save my own life or that of another. For this reason I can not accept a challenge to fight."

"No insult will move you, then?" cried Gaston Foix. "Draw your weapon and fight, or I will shoot you like a dog."

He had drawn his revolver and leveled it at the breast of Wallace Burton, who folded his arms and looked him steadily in the eye without moving a muscle of his firm young face. Half a dozen weapons were drawn instantly, while Wallace, without speaking, seemed to defy his enemy to fire. There are few men who can look into the eye of an undaunted man and fire at him, and Gaston Foix trembled and stood irresolute. At this moment a stalwart trapper known as Big Ben, stepped before the leveled pistol, holding one equally ready in his hand.

"I ain't got no conscientious scruples on the subject of fightin'," he said, quietly. "Begin shootin'! This young man has given a fair excuse, and ef you want satisfaction take it out like a man with natur's weepens. You're as big as he is."

"Who told you to interfere, Ben Slawson?" cried Gaston. "This is not your fight."

"I make it mine," was the answer. "I, Benjamin Slawson, trapper, fur-hunter, etcetera, meander in with my shooter in my fist. Begin shootin', ef yer gwine ter."

"I have no fight with you, Ben."

"So I parceive," replied Ben, with a grin; "thar ain't nenny wanderin' varmints on this pieceful sod that hankers arter me. Bat Gassy, my boy, I'd like a leetle skirmmage with you, ef it ar' convenient. I'd rather fight than not

ef yer stummick seems to crave that food. Come; shake yerself an' begin to pop yer shooter. Won't ye, oh, won't ye?"

"I won't fight without a reason," growled Foix.

"But I'll *give* ye a reason, ye low-lived hoss-thief's brother—you dirty, cowardly skunk! You don't want to fight, you don't; you want to blow yer horn. That's what's the matter with you. Ye ain't got nyther heart, head, nor pluck. You orter be tied to a tree on an alkali flat with sand flies blowing ye. You orter hev—ye orter git—I kain't think what's good fur ye!"

By way of reply Gaston Foix drew back the hammer of his revolver and Big Ben, nothing loth, did the same. Deadly hate shone in the eye of both and the pistols cracked together, and Gaston Foix, shot through the shoulder, spun sharply about on his heel and dropped his weapon.

"Don't shoot again," cried Wallace, darting between them. "He is hit hard."

With a look of demoniac rage Foix stooped and picked up his fallen pistol in his left hand and fired at Wallace before any one could interfere, and he fell, with a low cry. It was so dastardly an act that every man who had a pistol leveled it at Foix and began to shoot. He sprung into the office of the Land Agent and closing the door was ready for a siege. He was hit in three places but none of his wounds were bad ones and he was full of fight.

"Break in the door!" shouted Big Ben. "You'll give us leave, won't ye, Mr. Ryan?"

"I'll break it myself—myself," replied Ryan, planting his foot against the office door. "It's time for Judge Lynch to come—come. 'Um—umph."

Twice he struck the door with all his force but it resisted.

"I'll open it!" roared Big Ben, snatching up a heavy stone in the middle of the street. "We'll teach the low-lived skunk that Minnesoter ain't the cline fur murderers."

As he poised the heavy stone for a throw a shot came through one of the windows of the office which passed through the lower part of his right arm and the stone fell to the earth. There was a roar of rage from the borderers and

another man caught up the stone and with a single vigorous blow dashed the door from its hinges.

"Now look sharp, boys!" cried Big Ben. "He's a b'ar in a trap an' he'll fight hard. Don't throw away a life ef you kin help it. Hyar, you low-thief, Buck Bracer; go an' talk to him, talk like a Dutch uncle an' tell the critter he'd better give up."

"I'm afeard to go a-nigh the critter when he's in the rampage that way," whined Bracer. "He'd shoot me, likely."

"Sarve the world a good turn ef he would," growled Big Ben. "See yer, Gassy; you'd better come out an' give up."

"Come and take me," was the defiant answer. "I'll mark down the first two men that come into that door."

The men tried to get a shot at him through the window, but he had concealed himself in such a way as to be out of range while he could cover the door.

"Boys," said Mr. Ryan. "My little office isn't worth much, worth much. We'll burn it down, burn it down; 'um—umph; oh, yes."

Gaston Foix gnashed his teeth in a rage at this proposition so coolly put forward by the Land Agent. But he knew that cool character so well that he did not doubt for a moment that he would be as good as his word.

"Hold on," he said, sullenly, as one of the party went for a torch. "I give up; do what you like with me."

"Throw out your pistol, then."

The man obeyed and followed the weapon at once, when he was seized upon by half a dozen stout men, wild with rage. He was no longer the blustering fighting-man but looked death calmly in the face for he read his fate in the eyes of his captors.

"Yer in a tight fix, my boy," said Big Ben, as he coolly probed the wound in his own arm and picked out a splinter of bone with his knife. "I don't seem to reckon that your kind of men ar' enny good hyaraways and I judge you'll git rubbed out. Enny one got a piece of rope handy? He's guilty, in course, and we'll hang him a little, just fur fun."

"Don't do that, boys," whined Buck Bracer. "'Tain't fa'r; 'tain't lawful."

"We'll hang you with him ef ye don't look out," replied Ben. "Lay hold on *him*, boys; we'll give him scripter law fur bein' in bad kumpny, you understand."

They seized upon the ruffian, begging for mercy, and one of the men brought a piece of rope which was thrown over a projecting limb by the roadside.

"Don't carry it too fur, boys," whispered Mr. Ryan. "You don't really mean to hang him, of course."

"No?" said Ben. "An' why sh'u'dn't we hang him; we wanter, Mister Land Agint, you old repeater, come?"

"Let's give him a regular trial first."

"We ain't got time. Ain't we jedge, jury an' all the rest? Then why in thunder d'ye wanter *try* him? Ain't he guilty? - Thet's what I wanter know."

"What are you going to hang me for, gentlemen?" said Gaston, coolly.

"Fur murder," replied Big Ben.

"Who have I killed?"

"Thunder! You've got the worst cheek on you of any man in Minnesoter. Ain't thet rope reddy yit, T'ompson? Put it round his neck an' let him feel it."

The noose was adjusted about the neck of the doomed man, who stood calmly in the midst as if he had very little interest in their proceedings. One of the men, to try the rope, pulled hard upon the end and half lifted the victim from the ground.

"It works free," said Foix, getting his breath. "But Ben old boy, I want to ask you a question ef you please."

"Ask away."

"You are hanging me for the murder of that Burton?"

"You bet!"

"Then how can you hang me for the murder of a man who is alive before your eyes?"

All turned in amazement, and saw Wallace Burton seated upon the earth looking at them with wild and startled eyes.

CHAPTER IV.

LITTLE SPITFIRE.

BIG BEN uttered a yell of delight and ready hands were extended to assist the young man to rise. The bullet had passed through his cap and cut a furrow along the scalp, completely stunning him for the time being. He rose feebly and approached the group under the tree.

"What were you about to do, my good friends?" he said. "Surely you did not mean to hang this man without judge or jury?"

"We kain't wait fur sech foolishness as that ar', stranger," said Big Ben. "We allowed he was guilty ennyhow, an' we felt 'bliged to hang him, so ter speak. Howsumever, as yer ain't pegged out it stands to reason we kain't hang him *just now*, but we'll give him a leetle prary law. What say, boys; shill we sorto doctor his skin?"

"I hope that you will let him go free, as far as I am concerned," said Wallace. "I am not so much hurt after all and you can see that he is quite badly injured."

"You wouldn't believe he war hit to see the way he acts," said Ben. "He's a high old seed, I tell ye, and kin stand grief like a man. But, look hyar, he's bored a hole in my arm an' he's got ter git licked."

"What's that?" hissed Gaston Foix. "Would you dare to whip me like a dog?"

"Scripter law, you low critter," replied Big Ben. "Forty—save one, on the bare back."

"Look you, gentlemen," said Gaston. "I am a man ready to meet *death* when it comes, but my flesh has never been disgraced by a blow. Shoot me through the head, hang me if you will, but do not debase me."

"It's the least we kin do fur ye, Gassy," said Big Ben. "You've got ter take a hidin', sartin sure."

"Do your will, men," said Foix, hissing the words through his set teeth; "accursed be the hand which lays the scourge

upon my back. It will not kill me but the stripes will burn until I have washed them in the blood of the man who strikes as well as all who stand gaping and grinning by. I will speak no more."

"I wish you wouldn't do this," said Wallace. "Will you let him go free if he promises to leave this section?"

Big Ben shook his head. The old Regulator blood was up and he longed to see justice done upon the back of this desperado.

"If he will promise never to set foot in this hyar township ag'in or to lift his hand ag'in' enny man hyar I mout let him loose."

"He will promise that," said Wallace, eagerly. "I will answer for him."

"You have no right to answer for him," said one of the men. "Let him speak for himself."

"Then I will see you all scalped before I will make any promises of the kind," replied Gaston. "Am I the only man in Minnesota who ever drew a pistol in a street-fight? You may do your worst and I will try to remember your faces."

"He will have it," cried Big Ben. "Bring some switches boys, and we'll tickle him a bit."

One of the younger members of the party ran off eagerly and returned with a bundle of green switches which he cut from a beech tree near at hand.

"I'll do the licking," said Ben. "My left hand is out of order but I kin use my right yet, and I'll teach him not to make so cussid free with his betters."

The cord was removed from Gaston's neck and tied to his wrists, after his coat and vest had been removed. The end of the cord as before was thrown over a limb, and the young man who had brought the switches grasped the pendent ends and drew upon the rope until the feet of the bound man just rested on the earth.

"I warn you," hissed Foix. "One blow means death to you, Ben Slawson. Beware what you do."

Big Ben squared his giant shoulders, threw back his hand armed with a heavy switch, which the next moment cut the air with a whistling sound and alighted on the back of the

disgraced man. A streak of red appeared at once upon the flesh such was the force of the blow. The grating of the tortured man's teeth could be heard as he clenched them, and one was actually broken by the violence with which they were pressed together. Again and again the goad descended, but not a cry could the agony wring from Gaston Foix. He seemed now impervious to pain, and muttered savagely to himself, as blow after blow fell. His eyes seemed literally to emit flashes of fire. The tenth blow had fallen and the blood was streaming down his back from every stripe.

"Come away," whispered Wallace, to Mr. Ryan; "I can't stand this. I shall strike Ben if I stay, and he has been a good friend to me."

"Border justice, border justice," said Mr. Ryan. "The scamp deserves it—deserves it. Come into the office."

The two had turned to go away, and the whistling goad was again descending, when the beat of coming hoofs was heard, and Jennie Carroll came flying up on her noble black, riding man-fashion, and, scattering the bordermen right and left, cut the cord above the prisoner's wrists, with a small bowie knife.

"What do you mean by this, Ben Slawson?" she cried, flashing the bowie before his eyes. "I've a good mind to give you a taste of cold steel. What has he done, you brute? And you stood by and saw it done, Mr. Burton!"

"I did all I could to stop it," replied Wallace, actually appalled by the flashing eyes of the Amazon. "He deserved some punishment."

"Now look hyar, Spitfire," said big Ben Slawson. "The boys will stand most enny thing from you, but you mustn't interfere in this case. He tried to murder Mr. Burton hyar—shot him from behind, too, an' I've got his bullet in my arm now."

"Then *fight* him like a man, not *beat* him like a dog!" cried Jennie, as she sprung from the saddle and bent over the disgraced man, who lay almost senseless on the ground. "Bring water, whisky, any thing, you useless louts! Oh, I have a mind to—why don't you give me something to wash his poor back?"

"Hold on, Jennie," said the wounded man, rising feebly.

"Let the blood alone for the present. Will you lend me your horse to ride home?"

"Yes; take it," she cried, eagerly. "Oh, it is so cowardly; a dozen to one."

"Don't talk of it now, Jennie," said Gaston, grating his teeth, savagely. "There are ten men here, and before a year rolls by, some of them may be dead."

"D'ye threaten us?" cried Big Ben, making a step in advance. "Bear in mind, my lovely boy, that the rope is hyar yit, an' we know how to use it, right well."

"I don't threaten any one," was the calm reply. "As I said before, some of you *may* be dead within a year. A year is twelve months, and twelve months often bring great changes. My curse, my bitter, deadly curse upon all here, except this sweet girl. I almost fear to leave her with you lest you insult her, because she is friendly to her cousin."

"Don't you fret your eyelids, my sweet duck," said Ben. "Thar ain't a man on this section that wouldn't fight fur Jennie Carroll, any time of day. You'd better git, Gassy; we don't want you 'round hyar."

Gaston threw his coat over his shoulders, tying it about his neck by the sleeves, for he could not put it on his lacerated back. Having done this he mounted with difficulty and pain, and away he went at a break-neck pace after he had whispered an order in the ears of Buck Bracer.

"You ain't goin' to whip me, boys?" pleaded the ruffian. "I ain't done nothin', not as I knows on, an' it's awful rough on me, to be tied up this yer way."

"I move every man in the party gives this cuss a big kick, and then let him run," said Big Ben.

"Second the motion, motion," cried Mr. Ryan. "He is a mean scoundrel, scoundrel. Oh, yes."

The sentence was literally carried into effect. Buck Bracer was forced to pass down the line of waiting men, and as he did so, every one of them "lifted" him six inches from the earth. Ben was last in the line, and as his ponderous foot came in contact with the frame of Buck Bracer, that worthy was inverted suddenly and came down with a crash. The cords being now removed, Buck took advantage of the permission given and was off like an arrow from a bow.

"I am ashamed to see you engaged in this business, Mr. Burton," said Jennie.

"You hardly understand it, I think," said Wallace, removing his hat, and showing the track of the bullet along his scalp. "That is the mark of your worthy cousin. And, what is more, it was a shot fired from behind when I stepped between him and the pistol of Big Ben Slawson."

"That's a scandalous fac', Miss Jen," cried Big Ben. "Ef this critter hadn't come in atween thar would be one skunk less on the airth. I don't keer ef he is your cousin; he's a low, dirty skunk, an' one of these days you'll say so too. D'ye want a hoss to ride back to Turner's?"

"Yes," said Jennie, sadly, for she felt that, after all, Gastor had only received his just deserts. "Will you lend me one?"

"Sartin; you kin hev old Volcano, the best mustang this side the Rockies."

"Nonsense; I will give him five lengths start on a mile and beat him with my black, and Cub is not a match for Turner's colt. But bring him out, and I will try to get to Turner's with him."

With a snort of discontent, old Ben went away and returned shortly, leading a white mustang somewhat advanced in years, but yet showing traces of great powers. Jennie caught the bridle and leaped lightly into the saddle.

"Will you ride back, Mr. Burton?" she asked. "I came away from Turner's, because Rod Phelps made me mad, and now I am going back to give him as good as he sends. I'll teach him a lesson before the night is over."

Wallace laughed as he mounted, and the two rode away at a rapid rate while the party on the green looked after them smilingly.

"I wouldn't give more than a thousand dollars for that young man's life," said one of the party. "Those two will mark him down inside of three months."

"Bah!" replied Big Ben. "*Non comprendy*, as they say on the border of lake Winnepeg. I'll kill that pup myself inside of three weeks, I'm a thinking. An' that boy, though he don't fight duels, kin take keer of hisself, every time."

"I'm jubous we'll hev to go back to the old 'Regulation' boys," said another. "I hope them days ain't coming back."

"But they ar'," replied Old Ben. "I've see'd it comin' an' it ain't no use to buck ag'in' it. We'll do our best when the time comes, and that Gaston Foix will go among the first."

The party separated and went home. Two or three lived some miles from the town and took their horses. An hour later, the man who had held the rope lay at the bottom of a deep gulch, crushed out of the semblance of humanity by his fallen horse. Whether he had died by accident, or otherwise, the first of the insulters of Gaston Foix had met a fearful doom. But there was no wound upon him, and none could prove that he had not fallen by accident, while many believed that if he would, Gaston could tell how he died.

CHAPTER V.

THE SHOT THROUGH THE WINDOW.

THERE was a merry party at Turner's upon the return of Wallace Burton and Jennie. Rodney Phelps greeted her with a jolly shout.

"I told you she'd come back!" he cried. "She had to come; she couldn't bear to leave the field defeated."

"I've tried to find out the cause of your quarrel," said Wallace, laughing, "and all I can get from Miss Jennie is that you are too mean to live."

"I've changed my mind," said Jennie. "He is just mean enough to live, and *only* that."

"I told her the truth," said Rod. "She doubted one of my theories with respect to the power of man over woman, and I told her that *any* man, and myself especially, gifted with ordinary powers of persuasion, could marry *any* woman in his own rank of life in spite of herself."

"Now isn't that mean?" hissed Jennie. "Isn't it awful mean? Do you mean to tell me that you could marry *me* in spite of myself?"

"I fully intend to do so," replied Rod, coolly.

"Ur-r-r-b!" gurgled Jennie through her white teeth. "Oh,

I could bite you! Rod Phelps, I would not marry you if you were the last man on earth, and—"

"Adam the very first man
Did the very first woman obey!"

sung Rod Phelps, with his comical smile. "Now, what is the use of talking, Jen? You know you've got to marry me—there is no escape for you."

"Now *do* be quiet, Rod," said Mand, quickly. "You will be driving her away again before you know it. Don't let him get you angry, Jennie."

"I hate him!" hissed Jennie.

"No you don't, Jen; it is impossible to hate a man like me. You think you don't like me at present, but you are laboring under a delusion. You love me to distraction."

The rage of Miss Carroll was so genuine that Wallace burst into a loud laugh, in which every one joined.

"I'll punish you, Master Phelps," she said. "I'll teach you to insult me in this manner."

"It isn't my good looks," said Rod, quietly. "It is my pretty ways. The girls can't stand against it, somehow."

"Pretty ways!" muttered the girl, indignantly. "Don't say any more or I'll be off again. If any thing makes me wild, it is to have a beast of a man set himself up as master of the universe."

"What are you doing with Ben Slawson's mustang?" said Jesse Turner. "Come; shut up, Rod. We've had enough stuff from you."

"I lent my mustang to Gaston," replied Jennie; "and I'll tell you what it is, uncle Jesse, your friends at Huntsville are a set of cowards."

"Wait a moment; did you git the land you wanted, my boy?" said Turner, addressing Wallace.

"Just in time. Mr. Foix was there in half an hour, and after trying to bribe Mr. Ryan to give him my papers or else destroy them, he attempted to seize them himself, but Mr. Ryan drew a pistol on him. Then he offered twenty thousand dollars to me to give up my claims, and when I refused tried to murder me, or at least force me into a duel, which is against my principles, for I have promised never to fight a duel on any account. In the end it was a free fight, and he

was hurt in several places, after giving me a rather ugly scratch on the head. The boys thought I was dead, and were going to hang him, but as I came to my senses in time, they changed the plan and gave him a flogging. He has promised to kill us all before the year is up."

"He did not do that," said Jennie, who was bound to defend her cousin; "and if he had threatened it after that disgrace, I don't wonder."

"That critter is born to be hung, boys," said Jesse. "There is some reason why him and that dog Buck Bracer want that section of land, an' we must find it out. Can you give Rod the corners to your section now, Wallace?"

"I'll go with him myself," replied Wallace. "We will start to-morrow morning."

"Then I had better ride into the village and get my instruments," said Rod. "I'll run out this land with pleasure, and when Jennie and I are married, you can have neighbors, for I'll take up the next section."

"When we are!" hissed Jennie.

"Gentle shepherd, tell me when," sung Rod. He was continually making her angry by snatches of song, which were generally very *apropos*. She subsided with an angry look at her tormentor, and as the evening closed in, Jesse took down his rifle, and leaving the young people over a game of cards, went out toward the village, for he was ill at ease, and like Big Ben Slawson, 'snuffed danger in the air.'

The young party "cut for deal" and partners, and Maud fell to the lot of Wallace Burton, whereupon Jennie insisted that she would not play with Rod for a partner, and a change was effected. They were soon deep in the game, Jennie evincing her interest in it by standing on tiptoe in every important stage of the game, and banning Rod Phelps as a villain every time he took a trick from her. Wallace was too deeply interested in pretty Maud to pay very deep attention to the game, and they were beaten twice.

"I think you will play better if you have Maud for a partner," said Jennie, pouting. "Let us change again."

They rose to comply, when a rifle cracked, a pane of glass was shivered, and a bullet whistled within an inch of Wallace Burton's head. The two men grasped their weapons and ran

out into the moonlight just in time to see a solitary figure plunge into the woods.

"After him!" cried Wallace. "Follow me."

"Steady!" replied Rod, catching him by the arm. "I am a borderman, and know that it won't do to go tearing happy-go-lucky through the woods at night after a man armed with a rifle. Snake it, my boy, snake it. Crawl in the bush like an Indian and then we will run these dogs to earth."

"Who do you think it could be, Rod?" cried Jennie, whose eyes were flashing wildly. "A coward, whoever it was."

"Gaston Foix, or some one of his bloody gang," replied the young surveyor.

"I say that you speak falsely, Rod Phelps. Gaston Foix is not capable of a cowardly act."

"He is capable of any thing mean or base," was the quiet reply. "Why did the dog assault Mr. Burton—a man who had never wronged him, simply because he happened to buy a piece of land which he fancied? But don't let us stop fooling here, while the scoundrels escape. Come on, Wallace; I'll show you some woodcraft."

"I'll go, too," cried Jennie, snatching a rifle from the branching antlers, which hung suspended from the wall. "I'll go, to prove that you are a liar, Rod Phelps."

"Look here, old girl," said Rod, "you just stay in the house. I won't have any fooling now—you hear me!"

The young man darted out of the back-door, made a circuit, and entered the woods, but, by the time they reached it, old Jess was seen slowly making his way through the forest.

"Did you meet any one just now, old man?" cried Rod, eagerly.

"Oh, ya-as, ya-as," replied old Jess. "I met that ha-a'-f-breed critter they call Black Wolf—the one that squats up by the lake."

"Is he not a friend of Gaston Foix?"

"They ar' as thick as two thieves," replied the old man. "What uv it?"

"Nothing much," replied Rod; "only—mind I say, only—he fired through the window of your cabin, just now, and only missed this gentleman by half an inch."

Jess Turner gave a war-whoop which would have done

credit to an Apache, and leaped at least three feet from the earth.

"Oh, the owdashus, unprincipulled 'ruffians!" he roared. "Oh, the scum of the airt—the unb'iled, unwashed, ridiculous humbugs! Ha'r must be lifted; I feel a hankerin' arter wool, and wool I must hev!"

"Keep cool, old man," said Phelps, laughing. "Put the finger of silence on the lip of discretion, if you love me. I'm of the opinion that the time is coming when the 'committees' must come out and do a little of the old-time work of hanging, and Gaston Foix, before he knows it, may ornament a swinging-bough."

"Let's give chase," said Wallace; "perhaps we may earth the dog before he gets home."

"No use now, my boy," said Phelps. "There isn't a man in this section who can catch Black Wolf, when he once strikes a lope. No, let it rest now, and one of these days we'll hunt him up, the dirty dog. Look here—I'm going to ride down after my instruments, and I'll be back here before sun-up to-morrow."

They went back to the house, and the good-natured young surveyor, with a jolly good-by to all, rode away toward the village.

He had not gone a mile when the rustle of the bushes beside the path warned him that he had neighbors, and his rifle was cocked and ready. A dark form stole out of the bushes and stood in the path.

"Hullo, stranger," cried Phelps; "please get out of the way. We shoot mighty close, sometimes, out here in Minnesota."

"Is that you, Rod Phelps?" replied a voice, which he recognized as that of Gaston Foix.

"Yes; is it Foix?" cried Rod, bending forward to look closer, in the dusk of the evening.

"Ay, ay," replied Gaston, coming nearer. "You are the very man I wished to see. Can I get you to do a little job for me, to-morrow?"

"I'm engaged for that day and the next," replied Rod. "Do you want some land run out?"

"Yes."

"Where is it?"

"Section forty, up here by the lake."

"Why, what are you talking about, Gaston Foix? Don't I know well enough that 'section forty' was bought this very day by Wallace Burton?"

"What of it? Curse it, the land is mine, and this interloper has no right to come here and steal it from me. I'll have it, if I have to wade in blood to get it, and I want it surveyed."

"You'll have to excuse *me*," said Rod. "In fact, I promised Mr. Burton to run out the land for him."

"You'll have to break your promise," hissed Gaston Foix as his hand went to the bosom of his hunting-shirt.

"I reckon not," replied Rod, bringing his rifle to a level. "Take care, Mr. Foix. You know me well enough and can be tolerably certain that I shall not miss you at this distance. Put down your hand."

"Hold on," said Foix. "I give you my word of honor that I won't lift a hand against you now, but I want to speak to you for your own good. I'll give you five hundred dollars to do this job for me."

"I won't; what good would it do you to have this land surveyed, when you can't hold it? I should only rob you if I went up and surveyed it."

"The survey would give me a sort of claim," replied the other. "Come—a thousand dollars paid in your hand the moment the work is done."

Rod Phelps hesitated. He was a young man just making his way in the world, and a thousand dollars to him then would be absolute riches.

"Will you take it?" whispered Gaston Foix, eagerly.

"No; I'll keep my word with Wallace Burton, even though I lose so much by it."

"You are a fool and will never marry Jennie Carroll if I can prevent it. A willful man must have his way and I can only say that I am sorry for you. Good-night."

He darted into the bushes and was gone, and Phelps rode down the road in a thoughtful mood. It puzzled him exceedingly that Gaston Foix should be so fiercely intent upon getting this particular section. In his mind many others

equally eligible were to be found all along that shore. His desire had some other object than the mere possession of a few hundred acres of passable land.

"I'll study it out when I go over the land, to-morrow," muttered Rod. "Never you fear but I do. I know there's copper there for I've seen the carbonate myself, but how much there is I don't know. But what is copper if you can't find means to transport it? That is the question."

He approached the door of his father's house and dismounted, turning his horse into a broad pasture near and leaving the bridle on the fence. As he approached the door he was surprised to see a bowie sticking near the knob pinning a piece of paper to the woodwork.

"What's up now, I wonder?" said Rod, as he plucked out the bowie. "This means business certain."

He opened the paper and tried to read it by the light from the window, for he did not like to carry it into the house. Failing to read it he lighted match after match until he had mastered the contents. It was one of those mysterious warnings sometimes used to intimidate as coming from secret societies, and bore the representation of a coffin and dagger rudely drawn in red. Rod tore up the paper impatiently.

"Oh, pshaw! Do the fools think they can scare me with their warnings? It is simply ridiculous."

He entered the house and at once retired to his room. He was a heavy sleeper and in a few moments was oblivious to all outside things. The morning was just breaking when he awoke and found pinned to the bedclothes, a paper like the one he had read the night before. It ended thus: "Go not to section forty if you would live. I have warned you; beware!"

"I'd go if I knew I went to my death," cried Rod, crumpling the paper in his hand. "Some day I'll find the hand which wrote this and when I do there will be a fight."

He dressed hastily, found his instruments, and mounting rode away to Jess Turner's house.

CHAPTER IV.

MURDER MOST FOUL.

He passed over the same road which he had traversed the night before, and was stopped again by the persistent Gaston Foix.

"Come, my boy," he said. "I hope you have thought better of it and have come out to do this work for me and take a thousand dollars in good State money."

"Get out of the way, Foix! Curse me if I am not in the humor to put a ball plum through you where you stand. What one of your gang was in my room last night?"

"My gang?" said Gaston, starting. "What the devil do you mean by my gang—that is what I want to know?"

"Did *you* write that?" demanded Rod, drawing the crumpled paper from his pocket and giving it to Foix. He looked it over and gave it back.

"I did not write it."

"Did you order it written?"

"No; I don't know any thing about my strange champion, but I should not be surprised if it came from the 'Secret Brothers.'"

"The Secret Brothers must beware of me. Horse-thieves and murderers they are, every man, and one day I will be even with them for what they have done. I, Rodney Phelps, swear to run the Secret Brothers to earth. It isn't often that I get mad clear through; but I am in just that situation now."

"You'd better look out, Phelps," said Gaston in a whisper, looking furtively about him. "I warn you that the Secret Brothers are everywhere, and that even I fear them. If they are on your track, obey them in all things."

"Let them do their worst. I know some of their secrets now, and I will know more before a week has passed. I defy them to do me harm in any way."

He spurred his horse and galloped away at full speed, leaving Gaston Foix standing in the road.

"The fool must die in his folly," he said. "Now to keep my oath."

He entered the bushes and was gone, and shortly after the beat of hoofs was heard and a compact body of mounted men, twelve in number, passed through the woods toward the lake. Every man was clothed in black and every face concealed from view by a black mask.

Rod Phelps found Turner and Burton ready to go, and giving his horse, for he did not want him now, he prepared for work. Jennie Carroll saw him go, and would not come out to welcome him, and she saw his bright face grow sad as he tramped away with the tripod on his shoulder.

A few hours' hence and she would have given the world to recall that hour, but it was not to be. When he marched with downcast eyes past the little cabin and out into the woods beyond, she little knew that the fate in store for him would change her in a moment from a merry, careless girl to a woman, mad for vengeance. Out of the yellow sunlight and into the shadow of the woods which shielded his form from view. She saw him no more.

The surveyor's party reached the boundary of "section forty," and began an "angle." For some hours they worked on until they arrived at a point near the cabin of Gaston Foix. A long canoe lay upon the beach with the paddles beside it, but neither Buck Bracer, Black Wolf nor Gaston Foix were anywhere about, for Jess tried the door and found it locked.

"They've dug out," said the squatter. "It's mighty funny, too, 'cause I 'spected a muss with them this day of grace. I did, by mighty snakes. Is that bit of an island in your bounds, Wallace?"

"Yes; I noticed it when I was over here before, and as I did not want to have any one squatting on the island in front of me, I bought it in. This bay may be a great shipping point some day, and then I shall want my little island."

"Let's go over there and look," said Rod Phelps. "It seems to me from here as if some one had been digging on that island."

"Nonsense."

"I'll tell you what I'll do with you," said Phelps, laugh-

ing. "I'll buy one-third of that island without looking at it."

"What for?"

"On the chance, merely. I always play for a stake when there is a chance to win and I can get the odds. Come; my bill for surveying against a third of the island."

Regarding the matter as an excellent joke, Wallace took out a memorandum-book and portable inkstand, and wrote an agreement to sell, which agreement was witnessed by Jess Turner, who made his "mark."

"You two critters must be up to some foolishness," he grumbled. "Thar; Jess Turner, his mark. Looks pooty, don't it?"

While Old Jess was looking at the strange hieroglyphic which he dignified by the name of his mark, Rod Phelps was pushing off a canoe from the shore.

"Where are you going?" cried Wallace.

"Just want to look at my purchase," replied Rod, laughing. "I won't be long."

A few quick strokes of the paddle sent him flying across the narrow space between the mainland and the island, and as the canoe grounded upon the rocks he leaped out, and cast his eyes hastily about him. As he did so, they heard a cry of surprise, and he turned toward them with wild eyes, shouting something which they could not understand. At the same moment a rifle cracked, and they saw Rod Phelps stagger, clutch at the air for support and fall prostrate upon the rocks of the island. Wild cries rent the air, and a number of black-robed and masked men broke out of the cover and came down upon them like the wind.

"Heel it, Wallace!" yelled Old Jess, as he turned hastily at the gravelly shore. "Hyar comes the Secret Brothers."

Wallace did not hesitate, for he could see by the manner of the scout that he thought the peril imminent in the extreme. The two men ran as they had never run before, and as their course lay along the beach the horsemen gained upon them rapidly. The shore of the lake was very abrupt, with the exception of a narrow strip of gravel close to the water. Having satisfied himself that the entire party were on the gravel, Jess turned suddenly and scrambled up the bank,

followed by Wallace, and plunged into the dense swamp beyond.

"Come on!" he hissed. "I thort when you talked of buying this cussed swamp you was a fool, but I give it up now. You ain't so big a fool as you look. I'll trouble the Secret Brothers to catch me lyar, that's all." He dashed on over hummocks and fallen logs until the sound of pursuit died away in the distance, when he sat down upon a log, breathing hard, and lit his pipe. It may seem hard-hearted in this man that he could do that when he had just witnessed the death of a dear friend; but tobacco, with the borderman, is the only solace in any grief.

"Don't say nothing to me jest now, young 'un," said the old man, in a choking voice, while he pulled at the pipe, mechanically. "I can't bear it, I tell you, pard. I knowed that boy sence he was knee high to a prary-dorg. He wur allus the same critter, rough and tough at times, but a gentleman at heart. And he's bin murdered; you hear me—the Secret Brothers hez scooped him in, durn the'r pictur's, and I don't want no rest till I've treed them ugly ducks."

"Who are the Secret Brothers?" demanded Wallace.

"That's it; *who* ar' they? Hoss-thieves, murderers, burkers, and low-lived skunks of misery, I know they be, but I don't *know* a man as belongs to 'em. I mought suspect Black Wolf, Buck Bracer and critters of that kind, but I kain't *prove* any thing. But I'll know, and when I *do*—the **Regulators**, that's all."

"You won't wait for law?"

"We ar' a law onto ourselves out hyur," replied Old Jess, with a grim smile. "On'y let me get a clue to one, jest *one* of them bloody cusses and I'll hang on like a bull-dog, till the teeth meet in the flesh. I will, by thunder."

"Count me in, too," said Wallace. "I like i Red Phelps as well as if he had been my brother. There was something in his genial, hearty nature which suited me, and he has been most foully murdered. Where you go, I will follow, for I feel that when we pursue these black-robed dogs we follow my enemies as well as his murderer."

"He felt it coming too, poor boy," muttered Old Jess. "D'ye mind how he acted and looked back arter partan' wi

Jennie? Who will dare go back and tell *her* that he *is* murdered? I ain't got the pluck to do it fur one."

"Some one must tell her," said Wallace, "and I cannot do it, so let it be a woman. Speak to your daughter first, and let her break the news tenderly to her. Poor girl, poor girl. Underlying her pretended anger I could read a deep love for the young surveyor, and I fear that she will go mad. What do you propose to do?"

"I perpose to lay low until dark, and then git home as quick as mout be, and start up a party to foller these men. They'll watch the swamp mighty elust, but they won't foller me hyar. They know my rifle too durned well. Come along and I'll show ye a camp."

They tramped on over hummocks and logs, splashing through stagnant pools, each with his finger on his revolver ready for work on the instant, and reached a small swamp island, where they made a camp.

"I'll show you out of this as soon as dark comes on," said Jess. "I'll tell you what it is, thur's suthing about this land you've bought that we don't see yit, or they wouldn't do murder to keep it."

"What do you mean?"

"The hand that laid Rod Phelps in the dust will do as much for you if the chance ever comes. I, old Jess Turner, border keeracter and ginerally cussid old man, warn ye to look out for Gaston Foix."

"I suspect him," muttered Wallace; "but, who can prove that he murdered our friend? You saw nearly a dozen men in chaise of us and it might have been either of them."

"We ain't so durned particular about *proof* out hyar on the border," said Old Jess. "It's nigh about enuff to *suspect* a man with us, now you bet your life. All I kin say is, ef I meet Gaston Foix or Black Wolf, I'll let 'em have 't for fun. I'm a-talking bizness. You understand that, don't you?"

"You speak plainly enough," said Wallace. "How long will it take to get your regulators together, think?"

"Four and twenty hours, when they know that Rod Phelps, the best boy in Minnesotar, hez bin shot down like a dog. It makes me wild when I think of it, and I want to

shoot, burn and slay. I smell blood in the air, night and day, until the murderers of poor Rod ar' dead."

The two sat until night began to close in, when Old Jess took the lead and together they made their way out of the swamp. So well did Turner know the ground that when they emerged from the swamp, it was within a few rods of his cabin. A light shone in the window, and when they came in, splashed with mud and water, they found supper smoking on the rude board, while Jennie and Maud were seated before the fire, conversing in low tones upon some subject of such interest to them, that when Old Jess pushed open the door, they did not hear him. Jennie was speaking.

"And so, dear, you have my secret, the secret heart of wild Jen Carroll. I would die for Rod Phelps, if I must do it to save his life."

The two men looked at one another with wild, startled eyes. They had suspected this, but the plain avowal made their task harder to bear. Fearing that she would say something more, and with that innate delicacy which dwells in the heart of the true gentleman, no matter how ragged his coat, Jess Turner dropped the butt of his rifle heavily upon the threshold, while Wallace stepped back out of sight. Both girls started up, but Maud broke into a laugh as she saw who it was.

"Why, father! You look as if you had been dragged through a mud-hole. I don't think I ever saw such an object before. Where *have* you been?"

"Never mind my looks, gal," said Old Jess, dropping heavily into a seat. "Mr. Burton ain't so much better off than I am."

Jennie Carroll laughed lightly as Wallace also appeared, much the worse for the mud of the swamp.

"Now it only needs Rod Phelps to make up the mess," she cried. "By your fealty to me, Rodney Phelps, I command you to appear."

Ah, you could not know, poor girl, that your invocation fell upon ears which could not hear, that the lips which had pressed yours were dumb. Wallace Burton's heart gave a great throb, and he leaned against the wall for support.

Jennie stepped to the door and repeated her invocation and

the echoing words gave back a hollow answer. At the same moment Maud caught sight of her father's ghastly face and knew that something dreadful had happened, though what she could not tell.

"Why do you hesitate to speak, father?" she whispered.
"Has any thing happened to Rod?"

He made a silent gesture of assent.

"Dead?"

He bowed his head and then started up quickly and left the room. Then Jennie turned back from the door.

"And so Rod would not come with you, uncle Jess? He is angry with me, I suppose. Why do you not speak? why did you look at me so? Uncle! Has any evil come to Rod? Why, he is gone away. Mr. Burton where is Rodney Phelps?"

"My God," murmured Wallace; "*must* I tell her? I have not the heart."

"You are silent; you will not speak!" cried Jennie, wildly.
"If you would not have me go mad at once, speak out."

He covered his face with his hands and turned away. She looked at Maud and saw the horror imprinted on her face and knew the worst.

"Is he dead, Maud? You know it, if he is," she said, in an awe-struck whisper.

"My poor Jennie, my darling girl," replied Maud, clasping the other in her arms. "How can I comfort you; what can I say?"

"Is he dead?" she repeated, wildly.

"Yes," said Maud, sadly.

She fell like a dead weight into the arms of her friend, and Wallace sprung forward and aided the girl in carrying her to a bed in an alcove. Jess Turner stole softly in and together they stood looking at the marble face and as they stood the old man in broken tones told his daughter how Rod Phelps died.

"You stay by her, Maud; Mr. Barton and me have sworn to hunt these murderers down and we have no time to waste. Have you got your rifle and pistols handy, Burton? Ef you ain't, get them while I find the horses."

While Maud was bending over the unconscious form of her

friend, striving to bring her back to life Wallace set out the rifles and ammunition and prepared for a ride. He had scarcely done so when the horses were at the door. They could see that Jennie was coming back to life, and these strong men dared not remain to witness her grief. As their horses' feet were heard rattling over the rough road, Jennie started up.

"I hear horses," she cried. "Where are they going, Maud? I tell you that they must not leave me here while there is work to be done."

"Lie down again, Jennie," said Maud. "You are too weak to rise."

"It seems a horrible dream" whispered Jennie. "It can not be true. Did some one tell me that Rodney is dead? Ah! I remember now and I must fly to him."

Maud put her back easily as she started up, for she was weak as a child.

"You must tell me how he died, Maud," she whispered. "I shall die if I do not know at once. Oh, it is horrible—horrible. To think that he left me this morning in all the pride of manhood and now he is cold and dead. My poor, poor Rodney! My own love—the darling of my heart."

"Do not ask me to tell you now, dear Jennie," sobbed Maud. "Wait; I can not bear to tell you now."

"If you would not have me go mad you will speak," hissed the girl. "Is your father to blame or *your* lover, Wallace Burton? If he killed him I will not rest until he is dead."

"No, no, Jennie," sobbed Maud. "You wrong them both by the thought."

"Then tell me or I shall think you want to shield one or the other."

Then Maud in a voice full of anguish, with her arm about the neck of Jennie, and the hot forehead pressed against her bosom, told the sad tale; Jennie listened like one in a trance so as not to lose a word. Her unnatural calmness appalled her friend more than loud sorrow would have done, and when the tale was done, Jennie put her friend aside and rose.

"Do not try to stop me, now, girl," she cried. "Away."

I am called to avenge my murdered lover. Stay the whirlwind but stay not me!"

She ran wildly out to the stable and saddled the horse which she had borrowed from Big Ben, and in spite of the wild entreaties of Maud she mounted and dashed away through the woods toward the fatal spot where Rodney Phelps had fallen.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SECRET BROTHERS.

A DARK nook in a deep forest not two miles from the lake was the haunt of the blacked-robed men who had followed Rodney Phelps to his doom. They were scattered about the little opening in small groups, conversing eagerly upon some subject of interest to them. One of these groups comprised five men, Black Wolf and Buck Bracer being of the number.

"I tell you that it is of no use to blow, Buck Bracer," cried a tall, rather handsome young man who appeared to take the opposition. "The whole affair is foolish and wrong. What had Rodney Phelps, the best fellow on the Minnesota border, done to you or me, that he should be shot down like a dog? I don't mind running interlopers out of the country, mind you, but no bloodshed. And I say that it was a cowardly murder, whoever fired the shot."

"You'd better look out," growled Black Wolf. "Here is the captain."

Gaston Foix had crept up behind the speaker and heard his words with an evil smile upon his handsome face.

"A murder, eh, Byreton?" he said. "You are rather hard on us it seems to me."

"I don't know who fired the shot," replied Byreton, boldly, "and what is more, I don't care. It was a foul murder all the same."

"Suppose *I* fired it, Byreton?"

"It would not change the complexion of the affair."

"Look you, my boy," said Gaston, laying his hand upon a weapon. "This sort of thing can not go on any longer. I have watched you lately and I know that you meditate treachery to the Secret Brothers."

"It is false. By my own fault I am identified with this villainous party. I have given them my oath to be true to them, and that man does not live who dare accuse Jack Byreton of breaking a solemn oath. Once for all, the man who dared so accuse me I will kill with my own hand."

"I accuse you!" thundered Gaston Foix, drawing a pistol as he spoke. Byreton did the same and the weapons cracked at the same moment. Gaston was merely grazed, but Byreton, less fortunate, was shot through the fleshy part of the left shoulder.

"Put him with the other," said Foix, as he returned his weapon to his belt. "The fool would have it, and perhaps it is better that he should get his deserts thus early. When he is better and has tried to think of it calmly he may take his chance of rope or bullet."

"You'd better hang Jack Byreton now," whispered Black Wolf. "He's a devil when he once gets his blood up."

"I care not. Chain him down to the rocks and you shall be his jailer. Don't *starve* him, you understand, neither must you let him make a glutton of himself. Take good care of him."

"For some reason, which you dare not speak out," cried Byreton, "you wish to get rid of me. I warn you now to beware what you do, for I am not friendless even in this band. Let the man among you—except your man Friday and this cursed half-breed—say if I have ever wronged him."

A murmur of dissatisfaction arose among the men, for Byreton was something of a favorite. Gaston saw that a storm was brewing and half drawing a second pistol he sent a keen searching glance about the circle of dark faces as if looking for a man who dared speak out in favor of the prisoner. Most of them were too much afraid of him to dare any thing, for this class of men are seldom really brave; and Black Wolf and Buck Bracer led the prisoner away. Gaston jumped upon a log and addressed the men.

"I can see by your faces, my lads," he cried, "that you do not like my course with Jack Byreton. If you knew all the insults I have borne in silence, even while I knew that he was a traitor in his secret heart, you would praise rather than blame me. I have seen Jack with Rodney Phelps, a dozen times, and I have heard the surveyor say, again and again, that he knew a part of our secrets and would know the rest. Why was Jack Byreton at the Phelps' house so much? How did Rod Phelps know *any* of our secrets if Byreton did not betray us? I tell you, boys, it is but a step from life to death in Minnesota now. The settlers have lost so much that it will be short shrift, and sudden cord to any of us who fall alive into their hands, when they once know where their horses are gone. If Jack Byreton goes free, and informs against us we are dead men or exiles, and I ask you in all candor whether it would not be better to keep him shut up until we make our stake and are ready to leave?"

"We agree to that," replied a man who had been loudest in favor of Byreton, "but, we don't like your jailer. Some one else besides Black Wolf must take care of him."

"Why?"

"Wolf might make a mistake—you know yourself how forgetful he is—and he is liable to do it. He might forget to give Jack any thing to eat and drink, his knife-hand might slip—or some thing of that kind. He's dreadfully careless."

"You are inclined to be facetious, Mr. Gabe Best," said Foix.

"No; I'm in dead earnest, Cap. That cussid half-breed Sioux ain't to be trusted with a man's life, especially a man he hates."

"Let Buck Bracer take care of him then."

"That's out of the frying-pan into the fire. The cowardly lound is *mor'n* likely to make a mistake. I guess you'd better let me pick out a man to watch Jack. I know his habits best, and I can pick the right man."

Gaston Foix gnawed his lip hard, for he recognized in Gabe Best a turbulent spirit whom it would not be easy to put down. But, he made a virtue of necessity and yielded with a good grace.

"We won't quarrel about a trifle, boys," he said. "Pick your man, Gabe."

"I'll take the job myself," said Gabe, quietly. "And I reckon I'd better go before them two git out of sight."

He overtook Bracer and Black Wolf before they were out of sight of the camp, and told the half-breed he might go back. His small, black eyes twinkled with rage, for he had promised himself a terrible vengeance upon poor Jack Byreton. He looked back and saw Gaston Foix signaling him to return, and with a savage oath he turned back.

"You needn't go, Buck," said Best. "I want you to help me with the stone. - I don't reckon I could move it alone, nohow. You can fix it, and so you'll have to come along."

"You stood up for me after all, Gabe," said Byreton. "I'll owe it went to my heart when I saw you stand like a stone, and never offer to open your mouth in my defense."

"Don't make any mistakes, Jack," said Gabe Best. "I've been a good friend to you, but if it turns out you've betrayed us to Rod Phelps, saltpeter won't save you—for I'd be the first man to cut you down."

"If Rod Phelps knew any thing about the Secret Brothers, which I don't believe," said Jack, "he never got it from me, and he never would if he had lived a thousand years. No, no, my old boy; I never betrayed you and I never will."

"The proof of the pudding is in the eating," said Gabe. "I've got to put you in 'he coop, and I'll keep you there until the captain proves his charge or has had a fair chance to do it. There's a dozen men in the band more likely to betray us than you are, Jack. Why, this skunk here, Buck Bracer, if he thought he'd make a cent more by it than keeping faith with us, would go back on us as quick as you could wink your eye."

"What do you want to pick on me fur?" growled Bracer. "I'll be inter ye with a bloody spur ef ye don't look out."

"You'd look mighty nice trying it on!" sneered Best. "Way, you low, copper-nosed son-of-a-thief, I'd break you into the most minute fragments in two minutes by the clock—and you know it."

Bracer subsided, as he always did when his braggadocio was promptly met, and they kept on their way through the swamp, a distance of a mile or more. As they proceeded Gabe Best plucked some forest herbs which he chewed into a

pulp as he passed along. His purpose in doing this was soon apparent, for as they reached the lake shore he told Jack to stop, and splitting open the sleeve of his hunting-shirt he revealed the mark of the bullet, and saw that Jack had bled freely as they went.

"You wouldn't open your clam if you was dying," cried Best, indignantly. "Why didn't you say you were hard hit, you fool."

"It is a mere scratch," replied Byreton. "If my bullet had gone two inches to the right, the Secret Brothers would need a captain now. But I say! You may fix this thing up if you will, for it aches a little."

Gabe drew his bowie, and after feeling about for a while made an incision behind the shoulder, and the bullet which had passed nearly through the fleshy part of the shoulder dropped out into his hand. He took out a very ragged handkerchief and formed it into a bandage, and placing the pulp which he had been chewing upon the wound on each side, he kept the medicine in place by means of the bandage.

"There ain't any medicine on earth equal to that for a fresh wound, Jack," he said. "Here's the rest of the leaves and when these get dry, I'll put on some more. You'll promise not to run away while we move the stone now."

Jack nodded and followed them along the sand upon the lake shore to a place where a huge stone leaned carelessly against the wall of rock. By the exertion of their utmost powers, the two men succeeded in moving this stone aside, revealing an opening in the rock about three feet in height.

"Crawl in, Jack," said Gabe, "and we'll follow you."

Stooping low, Jack Byreton went forward, crouching for a distance of nearly a hundred yards, and stopped at an iron-studded door set into the rocks. Buck Bracer thrust back two powerful bolts and swung the door open, revealing a dark space beyond. Bracer stepped in; a match glimmered in his hand, and a wax candle which was set in a niche, showed that they were in a room about twelve feet square, furnished with a rough table, a stool and some blankets.

"Here we are, Jack," said Best. "I'm mighty sorry to lock you in here, but it's got to be did."

"I've got to see to the other prisoner," said Bracer, taking a candle from the niche. "You stay here."

"What other prisoner have you?" demanded Gabe Best.

"Never you mind, my boy," said Bracer. "This ain't nuthin' of your funeral, so you jest let me alone; I won't stand any foolishness about this yer prisoner, mind ye. Maybe I ain't much on the fight, but I'll do my darndest ef you foller me now."

"I don't care any thing about your prisoner," said Best. "Go and do your work, and be quick about it, too."

Bracer opened another door at the back of the cave-prison and passed in, closing and locking the door behind him. He was gone about twenty minutes, and when he came back he again locked the door carefully.

"There is plenty of grub in the hole, Jack," he said, "and it's ready cooked. You'd better make it last as long as you can, cause we kain't come hyer every day. Some one mont see us, ye know."

"I'll come as often as I can," said Best, "and I'll hold Buck Bracer to answer any thing that's done to you; so it's his interest to see that you are well treated. Good-by, old boy; take it as easy as you can."

They passed out; the heavy door swung into its place, and Jack Byreton was a prisoner in the silent cave. The awful stillness of the place appalled him, strong man as he was, and he felt like calling back his friend and begging him to use his influence to free him from prison. Yet he manned himself with an effort of his powerful will and whistled a merry tune.

At this moment there came a tremulous knock at the inner door. Jack Byreton started up eagerly and ran to the door, for he remembered that Buck Bracer had a prisoner there. The knock was not repeated, but a feeble voice called out:

"If you are a friend, help me."

"What is the matter?"

"I am wounded and a prisoner," was the reply.

"Who are you?" cried Jack. "I am a prisoner myself, but I will help you if I can."

And bending close to the door he waited for the faint reply.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE GIRL AVENGER.

AWAY through the woods on the back of her flying steed, went Jennie Carroll, sobbing as she rode. He was dead, then—her love, her hero, left a prey to the prowling wolves, while his friends had fled for safety! She would go to him; she would find him bleeding, perhaps, but there might be life in him, and where there is life there is hope.

Away, away! The mustang did not need the spur, for he moved at a flying pace over the rugged path. The guiding rein was obeyed at the slightest touch and Jennie came out into the open space in front of Gaston Foix's cabin and lightly bounded from the saddle, rifle in hand, and ran up to the door, which she struck heavily with her clenched hand. It was opened by a man in dark hunting-shirt, leggings and black beaver cap, with a dark, forbidding face. She did not know him but had no fear.

"Where is Gaston Foix?" she cried.

"Gaston Foix? Will I not do as well, my pretty one?"

"Take care!" she cried, throwing forward the rifle with an ominous click of the lock. "Even if I could not defend myself, Gaston Foix would have your life if you insulted me. Where is he?"

"I don't know. He will be back in a few hours."

"A murder has been committed at your very door and you know nothing of it! I want a boat; I am going to yonder little island."

"You must not go there."

"Who will stop me if I choose to go anywhere? I tell you again that a brutal murder has been done and if you refuse to let me go to the island be it on your own head, that is all."

"You are not going to that island."

"I am! And if you undertake to stop me your blood be upon your own head."

"Why, what kind of a fighting chicken have we here?" said the man, laughing lightly. "Once for all, I tell you that no one is allowed to go to that island."

"But I say that his body lies there as he fell, shot down by murderous hands," cried Jennie.

"Whose body?" demanded the man, staring. "There is no body on the island and you have surely made a mistake."

"Will you go with me and prove this?" said the girl, quietly. "Will you paddle a canoe once about the island and let me look? I can satisfy myself without landing that what you say is true."

"Any thing for a quiet life," was the laughing reply. "I am satisfied myself, and if I can do any thing to quiet the mind of a fair lady I am entirely at her service."

They entered a canoe, the man taking up the paddle and heading toward the island. When within about a hundred yards he began to make the circuit of the island, and Jennie standing erect in the bow of the canoe fixed her keen eyes upon the hard shores. It was so bare of all vegetation that the entire surface was in full view and she was satisfied that the body was not there.

"Land again," she said, quietly.

The man obeyed, and as he stepped out upon the sand he was met by the muzzle of the little rifle pointed at his heart.

"Down upon your knees, base wretch," she cried. "You are at my mercy and nothing can save your life."

The man was brave enough but the sudden attack took him by surprise and he staggered back pale as death.

"Don't point that gun at me," he hissed. "You are too cursed careless."

"You will think so before I have done with you," was the reply. "What was done with the body of Rodney Phelps?"

"I don't know what you mean," was the reply. "Who are you, anyhow, coming here with a blamed foolish yarn about somebody being murdered? Keep away the gun, will you? Do you want to kill me?"

"You act the part bravely," she said, "but it won't do with me. You are faithful to the Secret Brothers but if I

do not know what has been done with Rodney Phelps I will shoot you where you stand."

At the words 'Secret Brothers' the man turned more ghastly than ever. Jennie, who was watching his face intently, saw that she had hit the mark.

"I hope that you will tell me what I ask quietly, for nothing else will save your life. Your face tells me that you are a villain. Very well any fate will do for you. I will either shoot you down where you stand or drive you before me to Hunt's, where I will give you up to the vigilance committee. Doubtless your face will be known to some of them."

The proposition seemed to strike new terrors into the breast of this man, who looked wildly about him as if for some avenue of escape. Once his right hand dropped to the pistol in his belt but as Jennie raised her rifle without a word and drew a fine bead on him he gave up the idea of drawing a weapon.

"See here, girl," he said, "I don't know any thing about this matter, and if you kill me you kill an innocent man. I heard the shot when I was coming through the woods, and when I got to the cabin there wasn't a man anywhere in sight. I'd tell you more if I could, under the persuasion of a leveled rifle, but if you kill me you don't get any more out of me."

"Very well; I must believe you, I suppose, so I will take you down to Hunt's and give you up to the Vigilantes."

"Hold on!" he cried. "That isn't a fair shake, you know. Didn't you say that if I'd tell all I knew you would not trouble me?"

"You don't seem to *know* any thing, my friend," said Jennie. "If you can brush up your memory a little I might find it in my heart to let you go."

"You'll drive me too far yet," hissed the man, wildly. "I won't go to Hunt's for any one, much less a slip of a girl."

"Perhaps, in your wanderings, you may have heard of wild Jen Carroll?" she said.

"I have," he said, earnestly. "And I give in. See here; I cave at once and hav'n't got a word to say for myself--"

not a word to throw to a dog. I tell you that I am a friend of Gaston Foix and he's your cousin. You don't suspect *him* of having any thing to do with Rodney Phelps' death?"

"I don't know what to think," she cried, wildly. "They quarreled last night; I heard of it, and he might have struck Red down in his anger. Tell him when you see him that Jen Carroll is on the trail of her lover's murderer, and when she finds him woe be to him! Tell him from me this much more—that he has enemies who would make me believe that he could tell me how Rodney Phelps died."

"I'll remember—I'll tell him every cussid word, only don't be too rough on a chap. Can I go now?"

"Yes; you are at liberty."

The man sprung to the shed behind the cabin and led out a horse. A moment more and he was flying through the woods toward the camp of the Secret Brothers bent on seeing Gaston Foix, while, trailing him by the sound of his hoofs, the Girl Trailer followed after. She had not believed every thing which had been told her, and was yet determined to see Gaston Foix in person. The man rode rapidly, but wherever he went Jennie rode as swiftly and silently upon the trail. Into the pathless swamp, under the shadow of the great trees, she followed him, riding fearlessly into the midst of danger with her rifle on her saddle pommel in front. The way grew darker and more obscure, and she heard a strange trampling sound and a confused neighing as of many steeds.

"Uncle Jesse was right about one thing," muttered the girl. "The Secret Brothers are horse-thieves, dyed in the wool. Listen to that—only listen to that! It seems to me that they must have five hundred horses."

The guide did not halt at the swamp island where the horses were corraled, but they passed so closely that the girl could see the corral. It was one of those flat, swamp islands so often seen, well wooded, with plenty of grass and water, containing in all ten or fifteen acres of good land. This island was literally covered with horses of all kinds, kept within bounds by a double wall of felled logs, about seven feet in height. Through the spaces in these logs Jennie could see the cavalcade, and knew where the horses—which had been

missed by various settlers along the lake during the last two years—had gone. But, she only turned her eyes for a moment toward the island, and then followed her unwitting guide. After a two hours' ride he suddenly came out upon the swamp island where the Secret Brothers were camped, and Jennie halted in the edge of the timber to note what happened next. As she gazed, Gaston Foix emerged from a group of men and walked quickly to the side of the guide, who was near enough so that she could catch all that was said except an occasional word.

"Now then, Frisbee," cried Gaston Foix, "what have you got to report?"

"I've got considerable to say, Cap," replied the man. "After you left that mad cousin of yours—"

"Jennie Carroll?"

"The same little rascal."

"Now look here, all of you, and be sure you heed my words. Of all the followers of honesty upon this border, of all the friends I ever had, Jennie Carroll has been true to me. And the man that thinks to harm that girl had better take an ax in his left hand and chop off the other at the wrist. I will kill that man, if he were my brother, who dares lay a finger upon Jenny Carroll."

"You'd better hear me out, Cap. This girl, it seems, was in love with Rodney Phelps."

"Ha! Who told *you* that?"

"Nobody told me. The girl come riding through the woods alone, to find his body. Her spur dropped blood when she alighted at the door and demanded to see you, saying that a foul murder had been done in plain view of the cabin, and you must know something of it."

"I hope that you told her I was absent at the time," said Gaston, eagerly.

"Trust me for that! She didn't believe me, and, blame my picture, if she wasn't going to shoot me through the head because I would not confess who killed Rodney Phelps! She insisted on going over to the island—"

Gaston half drew a pistol from his belt as he interrupted the man sternly:

"Did you dare take her there?"

"No, no," cried Frisbee, earnestly; "I made a circuit in the canoe, about a hundred yards from the island, and let her see that there was no body. Then she tried the rifle on me, and allowed she'd give me up to the committee. You know that was more than I could bear, Cap."

"It would have been rough on you to get into Ben Slawson's hands," said Gaston, with a grin.

"How did *you* like it?" said Frisbee, quietly. "You know how it is yourself."

For a single moment the life of Frisbee hung suspended in the balance, for he saw the hot blood spirt up into the face of his captain, while his hand closed upon the hilt of a knife. Frisbee flashed out his bowie in wild alarm, but Gaston quietly waved him back.

"You may have a long life before you, Jim Frisbee," he said. "I hope that you have, but you were never nearer death than you were a moment since. Never, if you wish to live, dare to speak of that day in Huntsville. I warn you in all calmness to ever bear this in mind, or you may not live long."

"You drove me to say it, Cap," replied Frisbee. "I don't see what call you had to blow about my being afraid of Ben Slawson and old Jess Turner. I don't say it ain't true, but I don't like to hear about it any better'n you do."

"Let us both avoid the subject then," said Gaston. "I am glad I allowed myself time to think, for this very day I sent Jack Byreton to the cave prison because he opposed me."

"Jack ain't a bad fellow."

"No; he is not bad enough, the milksop. He was crying because Rod Phelps—" here his voice dropped so low that Jennie could not hear him, and kept up the tone through a long sentence, when he continued, more loudly—"But this is how we say upon the subject the better for all concerned. Don't speak of it to me unless it is absolutely necessary. If I had not thought that the safety of the band demanded this, at my hands, I should never have done it; but I have the proud consciousness in my heart that I have done good service to my men."

"I don't say you ain't, Cap," said the man; "I'm some like Jack Byreton though; I'm sorry for Rod Phelps."

"So am I," replied Gaston. "And what is worse, I warned him the night before, and even that morning that—"

"Of what did you warn him?" demanded Jennie Carroll, bursting suddenly out of the woods by a single bound of Stawson's white mustang. "Tell me, for I am the avenger of his blood! I have sworn, under the blue vault of heaven, never to turn aside until the murderer of my lover is under the sod."

"Mad girl!" cried Gaston Foix, "how did you come here?"

"Ask me no questions now, Gaston Foix, but answer mine, I charge you. Who killed Rodney Phelps?"

"Why do you come to me and ask the question? He was killed near my cabin I grant you, but what had I to do with this?"

"I do not know yet, Gaston Foix. I have been a good friend to you and have defended you at times when to defend you was almost a crime. I loved Rodney Phelps and yet we parted in anger the last time I looked upon his face. You know in some manner the secret of his fate and you must tell me."

"*Must* is a hard word to use when you speak to me."

"It may be so, but I use it all the same. You *shall* tell me why Rodney was killed and by whom or I will start a fire about your ears so warm that it will take some effort to quench it. Will you tell me?"

"You ask an impossibility at my hands, Jennie. No man on earth is more grieved than I am at having to give you pain. I feel it deeply, for, as you have said and as I said a moment since, you are the only true friend I had in this section. I did not know that you cared so much for Rodney Phelps or I might have done something more to avert this calamity."

"You warned him, you say; of what did you warn him and of whom?"

"I will not answer that because it would do no good. I warned him against his enemies."

"You refuse to help me, then?"

"I can not."

"God forgive you, then, Gaston Foix. I must do my work alone. Let the Secret Brothers beware!"

She reined her horse sharply aside and was about to ride away, when the man Frisbee, acting upon a wink from Gaston Foix, caught her bridle and held the mustang back.

"Hold on, my girl," he said. "You had the better of me a while since, and now I have the best of you. If the captain is so foolish as to let you go free, after nosing your way in here, we will not. Here, Black Wolf; take this girl out of the saddie and we'll keep her safe until—"

Quick to act in time of danger, Jennie pointed her rifle at the breast of Frisbee; but, still clinging to the bridle, he shielded himself by dropping at the length of the bridle in such a way that she could not get a shot at him. A dozen men were making toward her, when, drawing a small bowie, she severed the bridle by two quick cuts and touching the mustang with her armed heel was off like a shot.

"Thrice accursed fools!" hissed Gaston, forgetting his neutral position. "She is off!"

A single man, unobserved by Jennie, was leaning against a tree in the entrance to the island. He had a dark complexion, straight black hair and glittering eyes and any one would have known him for a "Greaser" at a glance. He had seen the attempt to take the girl, and, too indolent to exert himself, had not moved when the rest rushed in. When the mustang bounded away, approaching the tree where he stood, he slipped suddenly behind the trunk and waited. On came the flying steed, and the Mexican stood firm at his post, not moving hand or foot. Waving her hand defiantly in air Jennie was about to plunge into the woods when something whistled through the air and a loop of rawhide settled about her waist and tightened quickly and before she had time to think she was plucked out of the saddle by the skillful hand of the Mexican.

"I've got her," he yelled. "Carambo! She is mine, the captive of my bow and my spear."

But, Jennie had kept her right hand free, and a single slash of the bowie severed the lariat. A moment more and she was in the swamp, with half a dozen of the best trailers in the band upon her track

CHAPTER IX.

THE VIGILANTES' BOY RECRUIT.

THE Vigilantes were gathering from far and near to avenge the murder of Rodney Phelps. They came riding in from east, west and south, armed to the teeth, fiercely intent upon meting out the vengeance due for such a deed of blood. Ben Slawson was there, cool and confident, Old Jess Turner raving like a madman now, but when the real struggle began, the coolest man among them all; Wallace Burton, calm and self-reliant, for this was a cause in which he could fight without breaking his promise to his mother; Seth Phelps, the father of the murdered man, and his youngest son, Seth Jr.; "Repeater" Ryan, with his square, pugnacious jaw and dry, caustic speech—and a hundred more, the pick and flower of border chivalry. Brave men, every one a crack shot, to whom border warfare was a pastime—a welcome break in the monotony of trapping, fishing, farming and mining.

They met in a secluded glen, away from the village, and when a goodly party had assembled, Old Ben Slawson rose:

"Boyces," he said, "the time ar' come when we've got ter be up an' bizzy. A murder hez bin done an' the best boy in Minnesoter hez gone under. I judge thar ain't a man in this crowd thet wants to hear a long speech from me, an' ef they do they'll be disapp'inted. I nominate Repeater Ryan'ez President."

"Second the mosh'," cried Old Jess Turner.

"Aik in favor of the mosh' flip up his right duke; contrary minded, the left. 'The mosh' is kerried, younannimuss. Repeater Ryan, you ar elected President of this yur committee. You take the roost an' go on with the trouble"

Repeater Ryan at once stepped to the place designated by Ben Slawson, the master of ceremonies. He made a brief speech, accepting the post, which combined with the duties

of chairman those of a judge, and demanded the further pleasure of the meeting.

"I move we perceed to elect a captain an' two leftenants," cried Jess Turner.

"Second the mosh'," yelled Old Ben.

The question was put and carried, and the committee balloted for captain. Old Jess Turner was elected, much to his surprise and disgust. The ballots for lieutenants resulted in the election of Ben Slawson and Wallace Burton. The latter would have declined, but at a whisper from old Jess he kept silent.

"The boys mean bizzness when they giv a man an office," said the old trapper. "They won't like it ef you go back on 'em."

Five men had been sent out to the lake to see if they could find the body. They returned, soon after the meeting was organized, and reported that they were attacked near the shore by a concealed party, who seemed more desirous of driving them off than doing them any injury. One of these men produced a piece of crumpled paper which had been picked up on the road, and which proved to be the warning of the Secret Brothers which Rodney had found pinned to the bed-clothes upon the morning of his death. This was handed up to the President, who read it aloud.

"It seems from this that when we root out the horse-thieves—thieves—calling themselves Secret Brothers—Brothers, we avenge Rodney Phelps; 'um—umph! I leave it to you, Captain Turner, and your brave men, men. I'll fight in the ranks, ranks. My Irish blood is up, and I am getting mad, madder, every hour. 'Um, umph!" said Ryan.

"Lead us on," was the cry, and a hundred avengers were in the saddle. Pick your men from the armies of the world and you would find no such force of fighters as those who rode behind Captain Jess Turner.

"We won't go nigh the lake," said old Jess, as they rode on. "I don't want the cusses to know that the committee is out yit, and we'll come down on 'em like the wrathful whirlwind. Let us lay low, a day or two, and by that time the scouts 'll tell us whar to strike."

As he spoke he placed himself at the head of the column,

and forming in threes the gallant company went down the road at a swinging trot. At this moment a slight boy, mounted upon a strong black horse, turned an angle in the woods and was almost upon them. At the sight of the party he pulled hard upon the bridle and seemed about to fly, but, as many rifles, any one of which was deadly at that distance, were pointed at his heart, he came back slowly, and rode on to meet the Vigilantes.

He was a stranger to them all—a handsome young fellow, with a smooth, though bronzed cheek, and a piercing eye; his hair curled in little rings about a shapely head upon which a jaunty coon-skin cap was placed. He wore a buck-skin hunting-shirt with a fringed cape and his leggins and moccasins were ornamented in rare Indian style. The slight mustache which ornamented his upper lip showed that he was just budding into manhood.

"You'll excuse me, boys," he said, in a frank, careless way; "I was going to run at first, for you took me by surprise. I didn't know what kind of 'critters' you were."

"May I ask your name, y'ung 'un?" said Jess Turner. "I don't call to mind ever seeing you afore."

"Of course you never saw me before, for I've just come into the country. My name is Garry Forsythe, and I have come on a visit to some friends at Baconville."

"Prehaps you'd tell us who them friends mout be," said Turner.

"Samuel Vigors is one," replied the boy, promptly. "You see, I met him in Kansas City, last season, and as he invited me to come up here and go on a hunt with him, here I am."

"Who is your other friend?"

"Tom Wilson."

"Didn't you know that both them critters ar' off on a hunt now?"

"Is that so?" replied the boy. "How long will they be gone?"

"'Bout a month, I reckon."

"That is *too* bad," cried Forsythe. "Confound the luck anyhow; what shall I do with myself for a month? Say are you out on a hunt?"

"Yes."

"Buffalo?"

Old Jess shook his head. "Fiercer game than panther, grizzly or buffer; meaner than cayotes an' turkey buzzards."

"What is your game, then?"

"Hoss-thieves an' murderers. Boy, you've put your hand in the fire and can't draw it out. You must ride with us."

"If there is fun going," replied the reckless youngster, "I'm with you from the jump; nothing could suit me better. Only, when Tom and Sam come back from the hunt and say I'm all right, you won't hold me any longer."

"We'll prove what you ar' afore that, my boy," said the stout trapper. "Ride on, boys; I want to git off the main road."

They passed his cabin soon after, and saw Maud standing in the door, looking anxiously at them. She met her father's kindly look, the beaming glance from Wallace Turner's speaking eyes, the merry wink of Repeater Ryan, and then her eyes fell upon the slight figure of Garry Forsythe. She started and looked wildly at him, and as the band turned a bend in the road the last object upon which her eyes rested was the form of the new recruit.

"Who was that pretty girl, Cap?" demanded the boy, as they passed.

"Mine," was the short reply.

"Oh, pshaw; you old badger, do you think you can fool me? I cut my eye teeth, several years since."

"That's my darter, I tell ye!"

"Then she shall not be your daughter long, for I will marry her if she will have me."

"Don't be foolish, boy," said Wallace, frowning. "Talk about marrying ten years hence and it will do."

"I'll bet a hundred dollars against a turkey buzzard the fellow wants her himself," cried Garry. "All right, fair play is a jewel and you shall have that—but, I'll have the girl."

"I'll have to twist the little blockhead's neck," muttered Wallace, who was really getting angry. "Come, come; don't be stupid, for you are annoying the captain."

"He don't seem to feel half as bad about the matter as you do," replied the boy. "Look here; I'll give you a fair shake, but I'm bound to beat you, all the same. I'll bet you this horse against yours, that the first time I see her I walk up and kiss her and she won't object."

"I should feel obliged to give you a hiding if you tried it," was the reply.

"Silence in the ranks!" said the captain. "No blowing, from this out."

The party turned aside and entered the woods about two miles from the cabin. A half-hour's ride brought them to a leafy-bowered camping-ground, and at the orders of Old Jess the horses were picketed and the men dismounted.

"That's one thing I want, boys," said Turner. "Hev all the fun ye like, but don't make any more noise than you kin help. Will you promise?"

The men were obedient, and cards, horse-shoe-pitching and the like occupied their time, while the leaders were engaged in a discussion under the trees.

Then Wallace Burton mounted a stump and called the men about him.

"We have agreed to lie quiet for a day or two and send out ten scouts. They must go separately, and apparently upon a hunt. Bear in mind one thing, if any one of you should get upon the track of Buck Bracer, Gaston Foix or Black Wolf, follow them until you know where they go, for we believe that they are members of the infamous band known as the Secret Brothers. We want ten volunteers who will go upon this scout."

Thirty volunteered at once, and Wallace laughed.

"This is played out, boys," he said, "for you can't all go. I'll have to choose myself, and among such men, I can not go wrong."

He picked out the necessary number, and called them before him.

"We have reason to believe that the band has a rendezvous somewhere in 'Black Oak Swamp.' Search that thoroughly, and if you strike sign, come back here. After the second day, come back for orders, anyhow."

Having decided among themselves what part of the swamp

to search, they departed. When they were gone, Garry Forsythe came up to the captain.

"See here, Cap," he said; "you ought to send me out."

"Why?"

"Because I'm a stranger. These fellows would know your men, but they would not know me."

"You don't know the swamp."

"I've got a pocket-compass, and I am not such a bad scout either, I tell you."

"I don't keer to let you go. Yer a stranger to me, and mout be you'd go back on us. We kem out to avenge the murder of ez good a boy ez ever crossed a hoss, and we mean to do it."

"Tell me the story," said Garry, dropping his eyes.

In a few words Old Jess narrated the murder of poor Rod Phelps. He was surprised at its effect upon the boy. Twice he started up with a fierce exclamation, and as often he sat down on the log.

"It was a cowardly murder," he cried, "and the men who did it deserve any fate. Look at me, Captain Turner, and tell me if you think that I would betray you? I swear by all I hold holy and pure that I would be true to you if you let me go on this scout. I want to have something to do with this good and glorious work."

"I've a mind to trust ye," muttered Old Jess. "I know, in my own heart, that it's all right; but a vigilance committee won't be played with. You'll hev to stay, unless both the lestenants agree to let ye go."

"I'll ask them," cried Garry, eagerly, starting to his feet. "I 'most know that they'll say yes."

He stopped Wallace first, and preferred his request. The young man at once gave it. Ben Slawson was equally willing, and the boy came back triumphant.

"It's all right," he said. "They say that you are to do as you like about letting me go."

"I've changed my mind, sence," was the answer. "I kain't resk letting ye go. Them cusses might catch ye and make ye tell what we was up to."

"Red-hot irons would not draw a word from me!" replied the boy.

"Oh, yes; wait untel you *feel* the red-hot irons and then I'll talk to ye. It kain't be did."

"But I *must* go!" cried the youth, stamping his foot furiously upon the sod. "How dare you lie to me?"

"Lie!"

The hand of the old borderman dropped to his knife-hilt, but he could not draw it against a boy.

"Be keerful, little critter," he enjoined. "I'd swaller a man for that word you spoke."

"You gave me your word that I should go, if the lieutenants agreed."

"Did I?"

"Certainly; do not fear that I will be untruc, for I will go into the work heart and soul. The Indian will not be more wary than I, nor more cunning; so let me go."

"I keep my promise; *git!*"

The boy snatched up his rifle and ammunition, and without giving Turner time to change his mind, plunged at once into the woods, moving like one who was no stranger there. Old Jess looked after him with a strange, questioning glance.

CHAPTER X.

A BAFFLED WOOER.—A FEARFUL DEED.

Two days passed by. Gaston Foix had not been idle. He could see that the inhabitants of the lake region were now thoroughly aroused and that the time of the Secret Brothers, the men who had preyed so long upon the fruits of honest toil, was short, and that they must leave for "green fields and pastures new" or run the risk of the swaying limb. He was not the man to die easily, and determined to mark the last days of his stay by deeds which would be remembered long by all. He had not forgotten that day at Huntsville when the scourge was laid upon his back by the hands of Big Ben Slawson. Against him as wel as Wallace Burton and Repeater Ryan he determined to make his

oath good. Upon the return of Black Wolf after Gabe Best had superseded him in charge of Jack Byreton, he called the ruffian aside.

"Insa't and wrong have half driven me mad, Wolf," he said. "Can I depend on you to do me a service?"

"Yes," replied the half-breed; "what do you want?"

"I want some good friend to bring me the scalps of Wallace Burton and Big Ben Slawson. Remember our oath on the three crossed blades at the island. This Wallace Burton, if he does not know the secret now will know it soon, and when he does, good-by to our hopes. I will give two thousand dollars to the man who brings me the scalps of these two men, and *ten* thousand if with them I get the papers which Repeater Ryan gave to Wallace Burton."

"It would be strange if *I* should be the man to bring them to you," said Wolf, with a strange gleam in his black eyes.

"It *would* be an odd thing, Wolf," replied Gaston, with a furtive glance at the speaker, "and it would be a piece of good luck for you."

"May I go away for a day or two and try my luck?" said the half-breed after a pause.

"Stay as long as you like if you only bring me good news at last, Wolf," was the reply.

The outlaw tightened his belt, looked to see that his weapons were in good order, and with a short good-by to his captain, plunged into the forest.

"'Um, umph!' as Repeater Ryan would say," muttered Gaston. "At the least you have a bloodhound on your track, Mr. Wallace Burton. He will work hard for that money and I will pay it with a right good will if he succeeds. It is closing in upon me, but if I get through the month safely I shall do very well. But, a little love sweetens toil, and I think I will pay a visit to pretty Maud Turner."

Calling Back Bracer and two others of the ruffian band, he gave them some orders in a low tone and then mounting he rode rapidly through the swamp in the direction of Jess Turner's cabin, coming out of the swamp near the place where the old trapper and Wallace emerged upon the day of the murder. After tying his horse carefully in the edge

of the swamp he crept up cautiously and ascertained to his entire satisfaction that no one was in the cabin except Maud, who was seated near the front window looking out into the road. She held a photograph in her hand, and peering over her shoulder through the open window Gaston Foix saw that it was the picture of Wallace Burton. The sight made him gnash his white teeth with rage, for he hated even the sight of that bold, manly face. Was Wallace fated to be his rival in love as well as in all else? Leaving the window he stepped lightly to the front of the house and tapped at the door. It was opened by Maud, who started as she saw who her visitor was.

"Good-day, Miss Maud," he said. "I thought I would drop in for a moment in passing as I had a little time to spare. I hope that you are well to-day."

Maud replied briefly, for she remembered her father's warning against the man before her and his suspicious conduct in the affair at Huntsville. She did not invite him in, but, taking the invitation for granted, he deposited his rifle in a corner and sat down. Maud remained standing, hoping that he would go soon.

"I see that my presence disturbs you, Miss Maud," he said, laughing lightly. "I have no doubt that your father has warned you to beware of me."

"Mr. Foix," replied the girl, quietly, "you did me a service, or *appeared* to do so, the other day. I wish to be as friendly as possible with every one, and yet it seems best to me that you should not come here."

"And why?"

"My father does not like you for one thing," she answered. "He has told me to have as little to say to you as possible and I obey him in all things."

"Your father wrongs me by his causeless suspicion," replied Gaston, casting down his eyes. "What have I ever done to him that he should take this kind of revenge upon me? I would have been friendly to him always, but, for some unexplained reason, he persists in hating me."

"He has his reasons and would doubtless give them to you if you asked him," said Maud. "But, until he has changed his mind you ought not to come here."

"You are the magnet which attracts me here," he said. "Let me speak of that which is in my heart or I shall go mad. I have adored you for this year past but dared not speak, because I had not the means to give you the position your beauty claims. Now I am on the road to riches and I come to lay it all with an undivided heart at your feet."

"Mr. Foix," said Maud, angrily, "I am not aware that any thing in my conduct has given you encouragement to speak to me in this way. Take your answer, once and for all, sir; I do not love you, can never love you, and will not be your wife."

"You leave me without hope?" he said, in a low tone. "I did not think that *you* hated me or I should never have given you this opportunity to insult me. You will not marry me; you love this low adventurer who has so lately come among us, and who has robbed me like a liar and villain."

"You are—what you have just called him!" was the spirited reply. "Mr. Burton has never spoken to me of love, probably never will, but you shall not asperse him to me. You had better go, and let me warn you now that the avengers of poor Rod Phelps are on the track of his murderer."

He started up with a look of wild rage in his eyes.

"Who dares accuse me of the murder of the surveyor? Enough has been laid to my charge without that and I will not bear it."

"We know this much, sir; you tried to induce him, the night before and on the morning of the murder, to survey section forty in your name instead of Wallace Burton's. You offered him one thousand dollars for doing this and he refused, when you threatened him with signal vengeance if he did not do your bidding."

"What of that?"

"Circumstantial evidence goes very far with a vigilance committee," replied Maud. "I do not accuse you but I warn you to go away at once."

"I thank you for one thing, my dear girl," he said, with a sardonic laugh; "you have as good as told me that the Vigilantes are out and that I am marked down as one of the

victims. I thank you for the warning and shall know what to do."

"I am willing to give you this warning. One thing more—beware of Jennie Carroll, for the poor girl loved Rodney Phelps, and when she heard of his tragic death I think her brain reeled. She suspects that you know something of the crime, and she would not hesitate to strike a blow to avenge her lover."

"I have seen Jennie," he answered, bending his head. "Bad as I may seem there is a warm spot in my heart for that sweet girl, my only friend in this territory. Nothing grieves me half so much as the thought that she suspects me."

"I pray heaven she may wrong you—that we all wrong you, Gaston Foix. When you prove to me that you did not have any thing to do with this dastardly act I will be the first to retract all I have said. Until then I do not wish to see you."

He picked up his rifle and turned to go, but paused upon the threshold.

"This matter does not end here, my dear girl," he said. "Wallace Burton and all who aid and abet his wrongs against me shall hear of me again."

He closed the door and walked rapidly across the clearing to his horse. Here he took out a small bone whistle and blew three distinct calls.

"That will do it," he said. "Ha, ha, ha, my proud Miss, you little think with whom you have to deal when you insult me. There comes the answer."

The peculiar whistle was repeated in the woods, a few hundred yards away. Gaston untied his horse, mounted and rode deeper into the swamp, tethered the animal on a little island on the way to the haunt of the Secret Brothers. Then he flung himself down upon the green grass, singing to himself a French song from the verse of Victor Hugo. Suddenly the sky to the east, where he could see it through the leaves, reflected a bright glare.

"Prompt work!" he said, as the song ceased. "The boys have done the work well."

As he spoke he was conscious that a footman was mak-

ing his way cautiously through the swamp. Dropping prone upon the earth he peeped through the bushes and saw a person advancing with a rifle on his shoulder, in whom he recognized one of the men who had jeered at him when he was under the lash at Huntsville. He was a young farmer, Saul Davids by name.

"The second man!" hissed the outlaw, as he cocked his rifle. "He is on my trail, and he is doomed."

Davids advanced slowly and carefully. His feet touched the island and as he parted the bushes to enter the opening he was aware of the terrible figure which arose, rifle in hand, to confront him.

"Come on!" hissed Gaston Foix. "You are no better than a dead dog, you, who laughed at the insults heaped upon me at Huntsville."

"Mercy," pleaded Davids, who could not reach a weapon in time. "Mercy. I—"

The bullet was in his brain, and throwing up his hands the unfortunate man fell dead in his tracks at the feet of his murderer, who dropped the butt of his rifle upon the earth and coolly blew out the smoke.

"I may as well put the carrion out of sight," he said. "She would see it and it might work against me."

He raised the body in his arms and carried it to the edge of the island, where he flung it into a deep pool; it sunk at once. Then he coolly washed his hands and went back to his rifle, which he loaded carefully. He had scarcely done so when he heard some one else making a way through the swamp.

"Another! If it were only Ben Slawson or Wallace Barton it would be too much luck for one day."

He dropped behind the bushes and saw the boy who had given his name is Garry Forsythe. He was walking rapidly, giving a backward glance now and then as if he feared pursuit. He, too, made for the island, and as he saw the armed outlaw he drew a pistol quickly.

"Stand back," he gasped. "I will not be taken alive. I killed him in self-defense."

"Put up your pistol, my boy," said Gaston. "Who did you take me for?"

"A Vigilante."

Gaston Foix laughed until the wood rung again, for the idea that he was one of the Vigilantes pleased him.

"Tell a straight story now, my lad," he said. "Who have you killed?"

"I don't know his name," the boy replied. "It was a big brute who picked a quarrel with me in a village they call Huntsville. I fired first and killed him and then put for the swamp. I won't put up my pistol until I know who you are."

"I am an outlaw, my boy," was the reply, "and the Vigilantes are after *me* as well as you. I like your grit and I'll stand by you, if you are true to me. Did you ever hear of the Secret Brothers?"

"I heard some talk about them in Huntsville. The Vigilantes were out after them, and that is the reason they followed me so close. I reckon some of them are in the swamp now."

"I have just dropped one of them," said Gaston. "Luckily for you he got ahead of you and dropped on me. I thought you were one of the party at first. The Secret Brothers are bold fellows who think that the good things of this life are unequally divided and propose to take their share, and as I am of their opinion I have acted as their captain for three years. We shall leave here soon for other fields and if you care to join us you are welcome."

"I am with you. It is a fine, bold life and suits my temper well. Shall we move on now?"

"Not yet; I am waiting for some of my men who have gone on an errand for me. I think I hear them now but will soon find out."

He raised his whistle to his lips and sounded his call. The answer came back at once, and he turned to the boy with a smile.

"You are going to see the prettiest girl in Minnesota, but don't fall in love with her for I put in a prior claim. She had the bad taste to refuse me, and I was obliged, in order to do myself justice, to take her by force."

"I don't like that, captain."

"All's fair in love and war, my boy."

"It may be, but it is not the way with Garry Forsythe. You did not tell me your name, captain."

"Gaston Foix."

"Heard of you in Huntsville and am proud to serve under you. Here comes your party, I reckon, by the noise they make."

Two horsemen came splashing through the swamp in advance and forced their way through the bushes to the island. They were the men who had been called out with Black Bracer before the captain left the secret haunt. Another horseman appeared, the redoubtable Buck himself, mounted upon the black colt which was the especial pride of Old Jess Turner, and leading his own horse, upon which, securely bound to the saddle, but proud and defiant in her bearing, rode Maud Turner. Gaston Foix stepped out and greeted her with a smile.

CHAPTER XI.

GARRY FORSYTHE'S MISSION.

AT the sight of that handsome, Mephistophilean face, devilish in its beauty, Maud Turner understood by whose order she had been brought there, and the glance of scornful surprise with which she greeted him might have moved another man, but had no effect on him.

"You are quick to perceive that it is owing to me that you make this sudden flitting from your home, my dear girl," he said, with his usual careless laugh. "In fact, I have made up my mind that fair measures are lost upon you, and that force is the only means to employ. I am delighted beyond measure to welcome you to my wildwood home."

"I thought you a wicked man," was the reply of the forest beauty. "I never thought you a *coward* until now."

"A coward!" cried Gaston Foix, laying his hand upon the pistol in his belt. "Perdition!"

"Prove your manhood, you dastardly hound. Draw your pistol and shoot me down, like a murderer, as you are. I

believe, now, that your hand, and no other, killed Rodney Phelps, for you have showed me what you are capable of."

"This girl has got a heap of slack in her tongue," said Gerry Forsythe. "I should not think you'd stand it as long as you can find hickory switches anywhere."

The cool way in which he said this utterly astounded Gaston Foix, and he looked at the boy to see if he could detect any malicious mischief in his face. But the boy actually looked as if he meant what he said.

"You cold-blooded little villain!" he gasped. "Do you think I would use such means as that?"

"I've known it to tame a woman's tongue before now," replied the lad, quietly. "I'll be cursed if some of them don't need it, and if I am not very much mistaken, this girl has the devil's own temper."

"Never dare to hint at such a thing again, you young dog," cried Gaston Foix. "You'll do for the Secret Brotherhood, if any one on earth will. You are more cruel than Black Wolf or Buck Bracer—more cruel than I am."

"Thankee; you do me mighty proud, captain. You see what I am—a fugitive, with the stain of blood on my hands, and a rope and tree awaiting me if I am taken; so what have I to do with mercy?"

"That's the right spirit," said Gaston, approvingly. "Always remember the fate in store for you if taken, and you will be true to the Secret Brotherhood. I like you, my lad, and will prove it to you some day. Move on, boys; we'll follow at once. You are on foot, Forsythe?"

"Bet your life! My horse was hit in the shoulder, and dropped just as I got into the edge of the swamp."

"Lucky he didn't drop before, or you would have been taken."

"Bet your life I would. Cricky—that girl of yours is a roarer, captain; but she's got a tongue as long as the bowline of a frigate. You'll have some fun in trying to tone her down, I tell you."

"I'll tame her," hissed Foix, as he looked out after the retreating form of Maud Turner. "She hates me now, but when her new fancy, this cursed Wallace Barton, is under the sod, I'll have some chance. Come on."

The two followed the party, Gaston Foix in the saddle and the boy seated on the crupper, holding on by his captain's belt. If that worthy could have seen the expression of the boyish face, he might have doubted whether he had made a valuable acquisition or not. There was a fierce, wild look in it which it was hard to understand.

"I say, Cap, what did the girl mean about this Rood--Rod--Rodney Phelps?"

"A young surveyor, who was shot up here by the lake, a few days ago."

"She lays it to you."

"A great many things are laid to my charge in these latter days," replied Gaston, lightly. "Some of them I deserve, and others I don't."

"How about this one?"

"Ask me no questions and I'll tell you no lies. What good could it do you to know whether my hand or another laid Rod Phelps in the dust? He was nothing to you."

"No, no," replied the boy, in a strange, choking voice. "Nothing, nothing to me. An utter stranger, of course; but I like to hear of such deeds. I have a spice of the tiger in my blood, I'm thinking."

"I'll tell you this much, my lad," said Gaston Foix. "Rodney Phelps made a discovery which affected the fortunes of men who do not think much of a human life when that life stands in the way of their desires or interests. It was necessary that he should die, and he—died."

"Were *you* one of the men whose fortunes were involved, captain?" asked the boy.

"What do you ask so many questions for, boy?" cried the captain, turning in the saddle and looking savagely at the speaker. "I don't propose to answer any more of your questions."

"All right, Cap; all right," said the boy. "I didn't think you'd care about me. Lord bless you, what harm would it do for *me* to know?"

No more was said on this subject, and an hour later they passed the strange corral, where the captain halted.

"There is some of the loose property we have picked up from time to time. Every week, we send a drove on to one

of our corrals in the next large swamp—just a handy night's ride, and in that way work them out of the State. Then our men pick them out in small droves and send them to all points of the compass, to be sold for shekels of gold and shekels of silver; for we spoil the Egyptians mightily—yea, verily, do we so."

The nasal twang with which this was delivered struck the lad as intensely ludicrous, for he burst into a hearty laugh.

Reaching the island, they found that the men had already imprisoned Maud in one of the huts, and Buck Bracer stood guard at the door.

"She's in thar, Cap," he said, "an' ain't she tearin' mad! I believe my soul she'd raise the ha'r of this young man with you, she's so cussid mad."

"She will get over that, in time," replied Gaston, quietly. "I have yet to see the person, man or woman, whom I could not tame, if time and opportunity were only granted me. None of your insolence to her, however."

"What'n thunder d'ye mean?"

"I remember what you said to her upon the day when we went to Huntsville, you dog."

"I 'members the day, too," replied Buck, with a grin.

To his surprise, Gaston caught him by the throat, and shook him until his teeth seemed to rattle in his jaws.

"You dog, you thief, you low villain! How dare you remind me of that day? I will choke the life out of your infernal carcass."

Buck Bracer grew black in the face; his tongue protruded from his mouth, and if some one had not caught the arm of the irate captain, one villain the less would have cumbered the soil of Minnesota. Gaston dropped his hand and stood glaring at Bracer, who was reeling blindly backward, so fell had been the clasp upon his throat.

"What had he done, Cap?" said one of the men. "I'm sure I didn't hear anything out of the way."

"He knows—the black-hearted thief!" hissed Gaston Foix. "Hold up, you fool; what do you stagger in that way for?"

"I won't forget this," said Buck, passing his hand across

his throat, which seemed to be encircled by an iron band. "You've dan it once too off'n, Mister Gaston Foix."

"There, there, Buck," replied Foix; "let us say no more about this ridiculous business. It is very foolish, and you ought to have known better than to make me so angry; you ought, indeed."

"I won't do it again," replied Buck, quietly. "It's all right now, I s'pose, but you fastened on my throat like a tiger, an' I don't seem to like it, noways."

The boy, Forsythe, seemed to take the greatest delight in the scene. He stood laughing heartily while it was in progress, slapping his hand upon his thigh in a paroxysm of delight as Buck Bracer gasped for breath.

"He's a dirty coward, that chap," said Garry, as Buck turned away, "but even a snake has venom, and one day he may have it in his power to strike at you."

"I have no fear," said Gaston, haughtily. "If I had I would have shot him through the heart when he first insulted me. He knew well that the mention of that day at Huntsville drives me mad. I say, youngster, suppose you go in and speak to the girl for me. She is so mad at me now that I dare not face her. What do you say?"

"I never was afraid of a woman yet," replied the boy, "and I don't think I shall begin now. You have no idea how successful I have been with the dear creatures. What do you want me to do?"

"Simply to impress upon her that Gaston Foix is her pre-ordained husband, and that nothing can save her from the fate she seems to dread."

"Are you not afraid that I shall make love to her on my own hook?" demanded the boy, in an impudent tone.

"I should twist your neck if you offered such a thing," replied the captain, calmly. "Let him pass, Burrows; I have given him liberty to go in and speak to the prisoner."

Garry Forsythe flung open the door of the hut and walked briskly in. Maud, who was seated upon a low stool at the further end of the room, merely looked up at him, and as she did so her suspicions seemed to vanish, for a more impudent looking young demon was seldom seen.

"Good-day, my pretty one!" he said, coolly "Do you

happen to know who I am? I am Cupid's ambassador, sent to make love to you as the proxy of Captain Foix."

"If I must be made love to, I think I prefer the principal to the proxy. Why—you impudent little—"

"Easy, now, easy," said the boy, with a laugh. "Why can't we be friends, my dear? The devil is never so black as he is painted, and if I had not been unlucky enough to kill a man in Huntsville I never should have joined the Secret Brothers. Come, now—come; I'm a better fellow than you think I am, and you will like me if you know me better."

"I shall never forget your cruel words to Gaston Foix, this morning."

"Oh, nonsense, nonsense; you don't for a moment suppose that I really meant what I said? Not but that *some* women need a hiding badly enough. I've got a cousin somewhere in this section, who would be all the better for it, if all reports are true. Perhaps you know her—a wild girl who rides a horse man-fashion, knocks the ace of hearts out of a card at twenty paces with a pistol, and as far as she can see the spot with a rifle. Jennie Carroll is her name."

"Your cousin?"

"So they say."

"When I saw your face first, as you rode by our house with the Vigilantes, I thought you looked like Jennie, and if you are indeed her cousin I can easily account for it. What is your name?"

"Garry Forsythe."

"I have heard Jennie speak of you often, but she did not do you justice. You live in Kansas City?"

"Yes."

"Poor Jennie has been belied if any one has dared to say she is not a good and pure woman. Oh, my boy, she loved you, and spoke so happily of the time when you were to visit her father's house. How it would grieve her if she knew that you had joined this desperate band."

"She wouldn't say a word," replied the boy, who was standing near enough to the door to be certain that some one was listening outside. "*You* belie them now, for they are a band of noble fellows, who only seek their rights."

"Their rights? The only right they can justly claim is the right to hemp and tree. They are desperate villains, and Gaston Foix is the chief among them."

"The captain is a noble fellow," replied the boy, indignantly. "If he has done wrong he has been driven to it by the wickedness of man."

"I wish you would go away," said the girl. "I wonder that Jennie ever loved you, for you must be bad at heart—or very simple—to imbibe pernicious principles so young."

"But I am to make love to you," cried Garry. "The captain loves you and says that he will go through fire—"

"I will not hear you."

"He is a desperate man, and it would be better far for you to listen. He has instructed me to say that he is not the man to waste words. He is rich almost past the power of computation. Everything heart can desire or tongue can name—"

"Be silent!"

"Shall be given you at the slightest hint. I am not sure, if you wanted a star out of the firmament that he would not try to get it for you. Still obdurate? Then I have a talismanic word which I must whisper in your ear."

He made a lithe spring, and caught Maud around the waist so quickly that she could not escape, and whispered a word in her ear.

She caught him by the shoulders and looked into his eyes with a wild stare for a moment, and then, with a merry laugh, caught the boy around the neck and kissed his mustached lip. As she did so, the door was thrown open, and Gaston Foix, looking very angry, strode into the room.

CHAPTER XII.

THE FATE OF BLACK WOLF.

BLACK WOLF, the half-breed, was fully determined in his secret heart to be the one to bring his friend the news of the death of two of the men he hated so fiercely, and if possible to bring the papers which formed the claim of Wallace Burton to "Section Forty." The villain did not know the name of mercy, and undertook the task of murder as coolly as if it had been an everyday occurrence.

He moved toward Huntsville, having first cleared the swamp. No man knew better than Black Wolf the by-ways little frequented, solitary foot-paths, screened from observation by bushes and trees. He was passing through a patch of timber when he fell in with a man whom he could trust—a fellow who had not the pluck to join the band openly, but who did their dirty work in Huntsville as a spy. His name was Dirk Hutter. Wolf laid his heavy hand upon the shoulder of the spy, and stopped him.

"Let me alone," growled the man. "I can't be seen talking to you. Don't you know that the Vigilantes are up?"

"Are they? That is news to me, and I must hear more. Are you going to turn traitor, Dick Hutter?"

"No, Wolf, no, no; upon my soul, no; but it isn't safe to be talking here. Honor bright, is it now?"

"I don't know and I don't care. You've got to tell me what is up."

"I don't dare."

Black Wolf caught the spy suddenly by the breast, and flung him to the earth, planting his heavy knee upon his bosom. Then he drew a knife, and pressed the sharp point against the throat of the prostrate man, who was perfectly livid with fear.

"Now you want me to cut your cussed throat from ear to ear; that's what *you want*," growled Wolf.

"Mercy, mercy!" howled the coward. "I'll tell you everything."

"You'd better," replied Wolf. "Where are the Vigilantes?"

"They've bin out two days now, and we ain't heard a word from them," replied the man. "They are in Beaver Swamp, I'm told, somewhere nigh the dam."

"All right, tell me all you know about it."

In trembling accents the man did his bidding.

"Is that all you know?"

"Everything, everything."

"We don't need you any longer," said this fiend in human shape, as his knife was buried in the breast of the unfortunate spy. "You are too great a coward to do the work of the Secret Brothkers now."

The man gave a convulsive spring, and with a single gasp expired. Wolf coolly wiped his knife on the clothing of the murdered man and returned it to his belt.

"I reckon I'd better go to Beaver Swamp," he muttered. "Likely enough, they are both in the Vigilantes' camp."

An hour later and he was in Beaver Swamp, creeping on over hussock and rank grass with the caution inherited from his Indian blood. To such a man as this the task of finding out the hiding-place of the Vigilantes was a slight one, and before long he was snugly ensconced in a hollow log close to the camp, watching the movements of his enemies. He saw Ben Slawson, Old Jess Turner and Wallace walking about in the camp, and at one time the latter passed so close to his retreat that he might have put out his hand and touched him. At last two of them sat down upon the log and entered into conversation.

"It is about time we heard from some of the scouts," said Wallace.

"Yaas," replied Jess Turner, "but it'll go hard with the boys ef that cussid thief of a Foix gets his claws on 'em. That man don't think no more of takin' a human life than I would of killin' a woodchuck. Durn sech men, I say; the quicker they git rubbed out the better fur the world."

"What is your opinion of our new recruit?" asked Wallace.

"The chap that calls hisself Garry Forsythe, d'yc mean?"

"Yes."

"Trust him in any thing, my boy. He's true blue or I don't know any thing about human natur'. An' he's a sly one, too; bet yer life. He'll fool the Secret Brothers out of the'r boots."

"How long do you mean to wait for the scouts?"

"To-morrow morning we start; I don't keer what happens," replied Old Jess. "Some of the boys must come in afore that."

As they spoke one of the guards challenged and immediately after one of the scouts who had been sent out sprung through the bushes and approached the two leaders. As they saw his face they knew at once that he brought important news."

"Don't waste time, Dan," cried Wallace. "What's up now?"

"The devil is to pay. Gaston Foix has taken Maud Turner to the haunt of the Secret Brothers. I saw her tied on a horse, riding through the swamp guarded by Buck Bracer, and two other mean cusses, and just behind them came Gaston Foix and that boy we picked up this morning, both riding on one horse."

"Was the boy a prisoner?" demanded Wallace. "I had my doubts of that young scoundrel, all the time. "Oh, I will make Gaston Foix sweat blood for this!"

"The boy was going with him willingly," replied the scout. "I followed them and they went to an island in the swamp where they hold their camp. You wouldn't believe, boys, who I saw there—men you would as soon have suspected as your own brothers. We passed a corral where they had as good as two hundred horses they had stolen."

"Hold me or I'll bu'st!" roared Old Jess. "Some one put a lariat round me or I shall explode in many fragments. The dirty thief dares to lay his hands on my darter, the best gal in Minnesoter, eh? Why ain't the boys getting ready? I'll tear him all to pieces!"

"Wait a little," said Wallace. "I'll go as far and as fast as you will to the rescue of your daughter, for I love her, and with your consent mean to make her my wife. But, caution must be used or this coward might do her some

injury before we can free her. Is the band a strong one, Dan?"

"Not more than thirty men. Some of 'em will fight, but two out of every four will run like sheep. I saw Black Wolf coming out of the swamp this morning, but I didn't follow him because I had other work to do."

"I hope the mean sneak won't let me git a clutch on 'im," growled Old Jess. "What d'ye think we'd better do, Wallace?"

"It is too late to do any thing just at present. Wait until dark, and then, as you know the swamp so well, we can march out on foot and get to the island before sunrise."

"I think you ar' right," said Jess, musingly. "We kain't do any thing with hosses, and when we've cleaned 'em out thar'll be hosses enough and to spare. Let's make a fire and cook some grub, for the boys won't do any thing on empty stomachs. Oh, how it riles me when I think that Gaston Foix dare take my darter to his den!"

"Here seems to be a good log to start a fire against," said Wallace. "Let's roll it out."

Calling some of the men, they rolled the log on which they sat into the center of the glade and heaped lightwood upon it, which was quickly in a blaze. To the horror of the man in the log the end which was open, dry as tinder, caught fire first, and he was inclosed in a fiery furnace with no hope of escape except by crawling through the flames. The stoical nature of the man stood even this severe test, and for some moments he lay quiet, watching the flames as they eat into the dry rotten wood on the inside of the log.

"I'm treed," he muttered, savagely, "but if I've got to die, I'll die like a Sioux, with my teeth set."

From his position in the log he could only see for a little distance along the ground. Within the line of vision was the foot and part of the leg of a man, though who it was he could not tell. Raising his pistol he took aim through the flames and fired. The report was followed by a hollow groan and a man sunk heavily to the earth.

"The devil!" cried the hoarse voice of Ben Slawson. "Whar did that shot come from? Pick him up, boys."

As they stooped to lift the wounded man, two more shots

followed. A bullet grazed the wrist of Ben Slawson and another cut a finger from the right hand of Jess Turner.

"Blood and thunder!" roared Old Jess. "Thar's some one in the log."

As he spoke a flaming specter, fire from head beel, burst out of the hollow log and sprung into the midst of the Vigilantes, who gave way before his furious strokes. Wrapped in flames, in terrible agony, not a cry burst from the lips of the half-breed. A man who threw himself in the way went down with his skull crushed like an egg-shell. No man dared fire, for he was yet in the midst of the party, and no one was hardy enough to lay hands upon him while he was literally a blazing mass of fire. But, as he sprung toward the woods, rifles were lifted and eyes which seldom erred looked along the sights. But before a shot was fired an awful catastrophe occurred and the rifles dropped to the earth. The powder-flask which had been heated in the log suddenly exploded and the dropped to the earth, a mangled and blackened mass of mortality. They ran to him, dashed water over him and extinguished the flames. Scarcely a vestige of clothing was left, and his skin was black as that of a negro. It was impossible to tell who he was, so utterly was he disfigured.

Ben Slawson held a flask of water to the parched and blackened lips, and the miserable wretch vainly endeavored to raise a knife which lay at his side.

"Who is it?" asked Ben; "I don't know you."

"Black Wolf, the Sioux! All the devils from the pit take you to torment! My curse upon you evermore."

With a last effort of expiring strength he spit in the face bending over him, and with a single gasp fell back, dead.

"A black soul gone to account for the deeds done in the body," said Wallace. "He is the man who fired at me through the window of your house, the other night."

"He's made his mark on some of us," replied Jess. "Is Tom Crawford dead?"

One of the men nodded quietly, and some of them turned away and began to dig a shallow grave under the trees.

"Poor Tom!" said Wallace. "Well, well; we must all take our chances and he had no family to mourn his loss."

Let me look at Philips. I am surgeon enough to set a simple fracture."

While Wallace was bending over the wounded man and setting the broken bone as well as he could, the mangled form of Black Wolf and his victim were laid side by side in one grave. Death was not terrible to these men of the border, for they dared it daily and hourly in the pursuit of their calling.

"Where is Dan?" said Ben Slawson, when the earth had been heaped in a little mound above the dead man. "You kin guide us to the swamp island in the dark?"

"Yes."

"Take the lead, then."

He obeyed in silence, and leaving two of their number to watch the wounded man, the rest filed away on their mission of vengeance.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE FATE OF THE BROTHERHOOD.

For a single moment Gaston Foix stood glaring at the boy, who looked him saucily in the face as he quietly removed the arms of Maud Turner from his neck.

"You young dog," shouted Foix. "I will have your life for this."

"I warned you that no woman could resist me," was the reply, "and I do not think it gentlemanly to watch a person through a keyhole. You can't say that I did not do my best for you, and if the young lady prefers me to you I don't think I am to blame."

"And you, my pretty prude," gasped Foix, gnashing his teeth. "You were insulted by the mere thought of marrying me and what have you to say for yourself now?"

"I don't see that it concerns you in the least, Mr. Foix. I have done nothing of which I am in the least ashamed."

"What! To hug and kiss this little rascal before my very eyes?"

"If your eyes had been attending to their own proper business you would have nothing to complain of. I shall do as I think proper and I thank you for sending so pleasant an ambassador."

"You will not feel so well about it when I shoot this young dog down before your eyes," replied Gaston Foix as he drew a pistol from his belt. "Promise to marry me or he is dead."

"Shot for shot!" cried Garry Forsythe, drawing a weapon. "I am ready for you, so begin shooting as soon as you like."

The very coolness of the lad had its effect upon the desperado, who stood glaring in utter surprise.

"I hate to cut off so promising a bud," he said. "You certainly were born for the gallows if ever a boy was so born, and I will spare you for the present. Go out and leave us together."

Garry returned his weapon to his belt and went out, whistling the "Dead March in Saul" with a sly look at Maud.

"You are wrong, Mr. Foix," said Maud. "The boy was working in your interests and had almost persuaded me that it was better to yield to you than fare worse when you burst in upon us."

Gaston broke into a bitter laugh.

"It looked like it, I must say. If you require that sort of persuasion you had better take it from me."

"Gently, gently, if you please," she replied, pushing him back. "Your ungovernable temper makes me fear that my life with you would not be a happy one. I never could endure a jealous man."

"Maledictions! How much does it require to make a man jealous in your section?"

"But to be jealous of a boy—a mere child in fact. Do you acknowledge yourself so weak that you are afraid he will be too much for you?"

"You must own that I had some cause," he replied. "The advances seemed to come from you. But, let that pass. I will take measures to keep you safe from intrusions of this sort."

As he said this he turned quickly upon his heel and left

the cabin. Calling Buck Bracer to his side, he walked to the other end of the island, out of reach of every one, in a spot shaded by trees.

"How does your prisoner get on, Buck?" he demanded.

"The durned fool is goin' to git well, arter all the trouble I've had," was the response. "Cuss my kentry ef it ain't enuff to make a man strike his parints."

"He must not be allowed to escape," muttered Gaston Foix. "Remember the oath we swore."

"Tain't no use, Cap," growled Buck Bracer. "We're euchered out of that thar island. This cussid Burton 'll hang on till the piece comes out."

"Black Wolf is on his track!" was the fierce reply, "and he will give a good account of Wallace Burton. I have promised him ten thousand dollars if he brings me the scalps of Wallace and Big Ben."

"Ten thousand—thunder! Now that ain't friendly, Cap. You orter hev guv me a chance."

"What would you do?"

"Fur ten thousand! I'd eat a man's heart out fur five, I'd chaw him into mincemeat fur eight—what *wouldn't* I do fur ten!"

"You'd blow your horn for nothing," said the captain, quietly. "Now I've got a piece of work for *you* that I'll pay a hundred dollars for. I want you to take this girl to the cave, and put her in the little side room. Don't let any one know that you have done it."

"Gabe Best will know; he's a-foolin' round Jack Byreton every day."

"Does he know any thing about the other prisoner?"

"No he don't. He axed me, but I sed I'd see him durned afore I'd tell him a cussid word. Now you hear me."

"You must be very careful. I have not yet given up the island, and will make my claim good if I wade in blood to do it. I want to see Wolf come in with those scalps and then I shall be happy."

Little did he know the horrible fate in store for his infamous associate before the next sun arose. Buck Bracer took his orders and after dark entered the cabin, accompanied by Gaston.

"You are to go with this man," he said, "and the more quietly you go the better it will be for you."

"I shall make no opposition," she replied, quietly. "I think you care too much for me to allow any of your creatures to do me wrong. Where am I to go?"

"Never mind that now. You will be taken to a place of safety, and that is enough for you to know. Here is your hat. The place to which you will be taken is lonely, but nothing can reach you there."

Buck Bracer led her from the cabin, and they pursued their way in silence over the same road which had been taken by the refractory outlaw, Jack Byreton. Once Bracer stopped and look anxiously behind him.

"I thort I heard some 'un a-follerin'," he said. "Hold yer hush, will ye; I wanter listen."

They maintained a death-like silence, broken only by the cries of night birds. Bracer was satisfied that he must have been mistaken, and they again went on their way. When near the cave they were joined by Gabe Best on his way to visit his prisoner friend.

"See'd you a-coming out this way, and thought I'd kinder keep ye company," said Gabe, quietly.

"Oh, Mr. Best," cried Maud, "is it possible that you belong to this infamous band?"

"Looks like it," grunted Best. "What the devil ar' you doing with this gal, you thief of the world?"

"You'd better not meddle with her, Gabe Best! The cap-tin' is going to marry her, so he says."

"Is he? Then I won't mingle in the fray, just now. But, look here; if you, or Gaston Foix, or any of your gang, lay a finger on the girl to hurt her I take a hand in the game."

"Won't you take me away from this ruffian, Mr. Best? I will not marry Gaston Foix if he kills me for refusing."

"I can't help you now, gal," he said, irresolutely. "I've got other fish to fry, and no one to keep the fire hot but me. But, I won't forgit you, nary time."

They had now arrived at the cave. The two men pushed aside the stone and were about to enter, when Maud, obeying a motion of Gabe Best's hand, sprang suddenly up the bank and disappeared in the thick woods. With a yell of rage

Buck Bracer darted after her, but, as he made his first leap, his foot encountered *something*, which might have been a stone, but which felt more like a heavy boot. Whatever it was the obstacle was sufficient to cause Buck's feet to rise into the air, while he plowed a deep furrow in the gravel with his nose for at least a yard. When he rose, confused, the blood running down his face, Maud was nowhere in sight, but, with a furious oath, he again sprung away in pursuit, zealously followed by Gabe Best, who was chuckling over something which seemed to please him very much.

"What are you snickerin' about?" bawled Bracer. "Durn yer hide; I'm a ruined community ef that gal gits away. It's as much as my life is wuth to go back and tell the capt'in what has happened. Whar is she—whar is she—which way did she run?"

"She went like a flash of greased lightnin', Buck," was the reply. "She's in the swamp, and that's all I know. Dig arter her, and I'll go back and look after my chicken."

Gabe Best turned back toward the cave, leaving Buck to follow on the trail of Maud Turner. The girl, once at liberty, was lost in the darkness of the swamp, but she went on desperately, rather daring the dangers of the swamp than to remain in the hands of these wretches. Deeper and deeper into the dark depths she made her way, while behind her she heard the coming feet of Buck Bracer, who had, in some way, got upon her trail. Desperate she fled on at her utmost speed, splashing through the pools of stagnant water and still hearing those hurrying feet behind her.

The night was dark, and under the overhanging boughs it was blacker than Erebus. Nearer and nearer came the hurrying feet, and in a moment more she was in the grasp of Buck Bracer.

"Aha, my lady!" he cried, gasping for breath. "You thought you'd git away from me, eh? You can't come it, you sly critter. I'll drag you back, if I have to tie you hand and foot."

Maud struggled desperately, but her strength was nothing in the hands of such a man as Buck Bracer, a perfect Hercules in bodily power, though a coward at heart. He mastered her and bound her hands tightly.

"I've got you," he hissed, "and now you ar' in my power. I remember how you insulted me—"

What the scoundrel meant to say, can never be known for at this moment he felt the cold barrel of a pistol pressed against his temple, while a voice whispered at his ear—

"Down on your knees!"

The brute dropped as if stricken down by a thunderbolt and immediately after his arms were drawn back and tied at the elbows.

"Lie down!" cried the same voice. The scoundrel obeyed and his feet were as securely bound. Then the light of a "dark-lantern" shone upon the scene and he saw Garry Forsythe bending over him.

"You!" cried Maud.

"Hush!" replied Garry, lifting his hand. "Remember that I am Jennie's cousin, and do this for her sake."

"Yer a traitor!" shrieked Buck Bracer. "Wait till the capt'in knows it."

"The captain will have enough to do to guard his own head from the bolt which threatens to fall upon it. Hark! As I live, the Vigilantes are already in the swamp. Stay where you are, Maud, and I will join you in a moment."

He rushed away in the gloom and was absent ten minutes. Then the pattering of coming feet was heard and half a dozen men joined them, with Garry at their head.

"There she is, safe and sound," cried the boy. "Tell me that I am a traitor now, if you dare."

With a cry of joy, Maud threw herself into the extended arms of her father, while Wallace caught the hand of Garry and pressed it warmly.

"I have wronged you, in my heart," he said. "The best atonement a man can make for a wrong is to acknowledge it, and that is all I can do."

"I forgive you," cried Garry, in a low voice. "But, let us not waste time, for if we move on quickly, we can take the Secret Brothers unawares."

The band of Vigilantes trooped on under the bending boughs. Four men, silently designated by the motion of Jess Turner's hand, remained with Buck Bracer. One of them took a lariat which was wound about his waist, made

a running noose in one end and flung the other over a branch. Ten minutes after they joined the company and silently fell into line. They had left the lariat behind them! The band marched on under the solemn shade.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SECRET OF THE ISLAND.

SOME foreboding of his impending fate hung over Gaston Foix. He was restless, and found himself continually going to the door of the cabin to look out into the gloom. He lay down and tried to rest but found the effort vain. He sprang from his uneasy couch and rushed out into the forest, where he wandered aimlessly up and down for over half an hour, when he again returned to the island.

"There is death in the air," he cried, with an uneasy glance about him. "I feel it as I walk and it seems as if the impending fate hung over me. Whence comes this warning for which I can not account?"

"The men I have murdered are all about me. I seem to feel them near me, in the very air which I breathe. Why did I kill that poor fellow in the swamp this morning? Why did I tumble that other horse and man over that terrible cliff? I am a murderer, and shall I meet a murderer's fate? Ah!"

He saw dark forms moving in the edge of the thicket and knew at a glance that his enemies were upon him. At any other time the man would have turned and fought like a tiger, but now he was cowed, and turning swiftly on his heel without a cry, he ran back among the cabins. Silently, but swiftly, the cabins were hemmed in by the Vigilantes, and then they rushed in with yells of vengeance. Caught in a trap, all the Secret Brotherhood could do was to turn upon the enemy like tigers and fight desperately for vengeance, since they could not save their lives.

It was an awful combat, and when the bloody strife was

done, not a man of the Brotherhood was on his feet. "Some found their graves where first they stood, and some with harder struggle died." Frontier vengeance is terrible when once aroused, and mercy was not asked or expected. Big Ben, Jess Turner and Wallace raged like tigers, but some whom the young man might have spared were struck down by others.

"That job's done," said Jess Turner, cool as ice, while he wiped his bowie upon the bushy head of the last man who had fallen. "Who has seen Gaston Foix?"

"He ain't been in the muss," cried Big Ben. "I want him orfal, but he didn't show, and in my 'pinion he's give leg bail."

"This way!" cried Garry Forsythe, who had been standing at the edge of the cover having Maud Turner in charge. "Four men will do to follow Gaston Foix."

Leaving the men to take charge of the wounded, Wallace, Ben and Old Jess followed the boy through the woods. He struck into a sort of run and they followed at the same pace, which quickly carried them out of the swamp. Half an hour later they stood before the cave and found the stone rolled away from the door while the sound of angry voices was heard within.

"I'll stand here to defend him," cried a voice, which they knew as that of Jack Byreton. "You shall not strike a wounded man when I am by."

"Look out, Jack!" hissed Gaston Foix. "I've blood enough on my hands without yours, but he's to blame for all this trouble and I will kill him. Stand aside, or I fire."

"I dare you to fire," roared Jack Byreton, as he shook his manacled hands in the air.

A flash and report followed by a heavy fall was heard in the cave. Wallace and the rest rushed in just in time to see Gaston Foix, pistol in hand, rush into the dark passage over the body of Jack Byreton. As he looked into the little room where he thought Maud was confined he uttered a wild cry of rage.

"Gone, gone!" he screamed. "Death to all who stop me."

He ran out into the larger room again, where he suddenly

recoiled as he saw so many enemies. Among the rest he caught sight of Garry Forsythe.

"Traitorous young dog!" he hissed. "You betrayed me to my enemies. Then take your doom."

The pistol cracked and Garry wavered for a moment and fell into the arms of Wallace Burton. Before you could have counted two Gaston Foix leaped into the air, shot through the heart by Big Ben Slawson. As Wallace laid the silent form of Garry upon the earth, the light mustache became detached and he saw looking up at him the wan face of Jennie Carroll!

Jack Byreton was not dead. He raised himself on his elbow, dazed and stunned, and pointed into the passage at the back. Ben Slawson rushed in and quickly emerged, carrying in his arms a man in whose emaciated face it was hard to trace the lineaments of Rod Phelps the young surveyor. As he caught sight of the pale face upon Wallace Burton's knee, he uttered a cry of agony and caught her in his arms, feeble as he was.

"She is mine—mine in life or death!" he cried. "Where is the man who killed her?"

"There," replied Wallace, solemnly pointing to Gaston Foix. "The murderer has met the fate he merited."

"Bring water, some one," cried the young man. "Why do you hesitate when it may save her life? You are something of a surgeon, Mr. Burton, for God's sake do all you can."

At this moment Gabe Best came in with a can of water in his hand. He had only left Jack Byreton a moment before, and the bloody scene before him caused him to start back in horror and surprise.

"Give me the water," cried Wallace, snatching it from his hand.

"And don't go away, Gabe," said Ben Slawson. "I want you."

"I ain't going to run," replied Gabe, quietly. "I reckon I've got to the end of my rope. What man among you was mean enough to shoot a man with irons on his hands? I didn't think it of you."

"Gaston Foix did it!" cried Byreton. "Don't blame the boys."

Wallace washed the blood from Jennie Carroll's head and found that the bullet had grazed her skull, stunning her for the time. A timely use of spirits brought her back to life, and as she saw the pale face bending over her she uttered a delirious scream of joy as the arm of her lover again enfolded her.

"You have won a noble woman," said Wallace Burton. "I hope you love her as she deserves."

The devoted look which the surveyor cast upon the pale face on his breast was the only answer, and then Wallace spoke again.

"Mr. Best, I have a few words to say to you. Miss Turner tells me that you aided her to escape this night and there has been blood enough shed. When we go away in the morning we will leave you here with your friend and give you a month to get out of the country, never to return until you can say that you are an honest man."

"It's mor'n we deserve," said Best, sadly. "Jack and I thank you for it. I wouldn't 'a' gone away without him."

Next morning the men assisted Gabe Best in the burial of Gaston Foix, and they went to the camp of the Brothers. Jennie had already heard her lover's story. After he had been shot down he had been placed in a canoe by Buck Bracer and Black Wolf and brought to the cave, where Bracer was made his jailer. The rest was all new to him, and he listened to the story of Jennie's search for him.

She had escaped easily after cutting herself loose from the lasso of the Mexican, and hurried to the island where the horses were corraled. Selecting one, she rode home without saddle or bridle, guiding the animal by means of a green withe twisted about his neck. There she found her cousin from Kansas City and jestingly said that if she wore his clothing she could pass herself off as a boy with Maud Turner, and he lent her a hunting-suit which he had bought. How she managed to join the Vigilantes and the dangers which followed we already know.

"And I have won your horse, Mr. Turner, for I let you that I would kiss Maud the first time I met her."

"The horse is yours," replied Wallace, laughing. "You cheated us all."

In a few days Rod Phelps was convalescent and the party at his invitation rode out to the place where he had been wounded. Maud, Jennie, Wallace, Old Jess and Repeater Ryan were of the party. The large canoe of Gaston Foix lay abandoned on the shore.

"Get into the canoe all of you," said Rod. "I am going to show you why Gaston Foix was ready to do murder to possess the land."

The canoe quickly passed over the narrow space and the party landed. In the middle of the island lay an iron bar, and taking it up, Rod struck the rock sharply. Instead of the sound of iron against stone they heard the peculiar thud which follows when a hard metal strikes a softer one. Stooping quickly Rod took up a detached fragment and held it up before them, gleaming in the sun.

"Silver!" said Rod. "In the little space upon which we stand are riches enough to make you the wealthiest man in Minnesota. I congratulate you, Burton. And while we are on the subject, here is the paper which you signed, giving me one-third of the island. Take it back."

Wallace looked at the paper in silence.

"I have no right to it," said Rod. "Neither of us dreamed what we were doing when that paper was signed."

Maud was eagerly watching her lover, to see if his love of wealth would permit him to take back the paper, and her heart gave a great throb as he took it—a throb of anguish—for she said to her heart that now she would never be his wife. But he turned to Jennie with a smile, and put it in her hand.

"Take it," he said, "and keep it safe, for Rod might be mad enough to destroy it. On your wedding-day give it to your husband, for he has earned it nobly by your help. Do you think I am a rascal, Rod Phelps?"

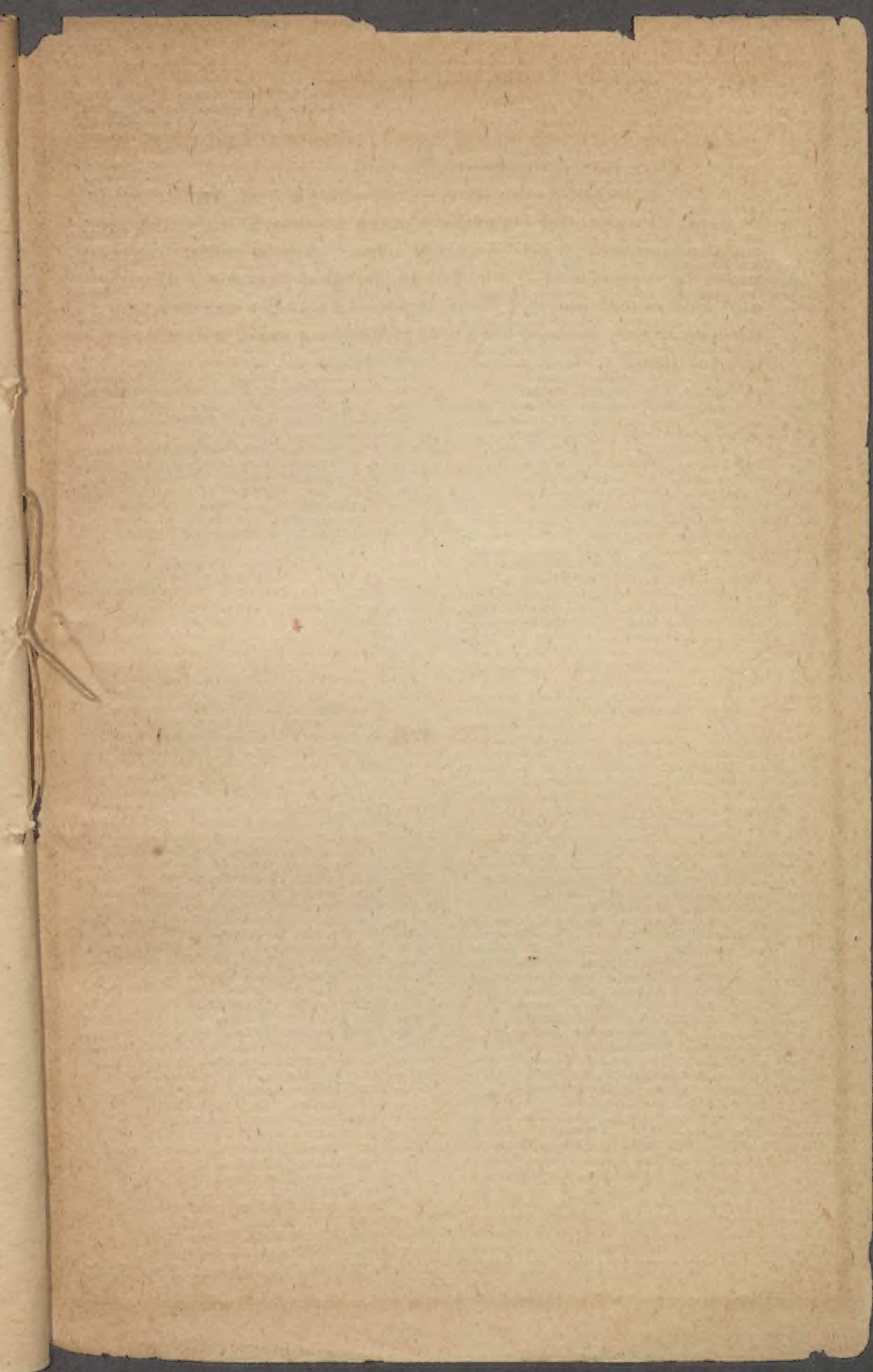
"Bully for you, Mr. Burton!" cried Old Jess. "I give you what you asked of me now, and welcome, but if you took back that paper, I'd see you durned fust."

Three months after, there was a grand double wedding at Squire Seth Phelps' house, in Huntsville, when Wallace and Maud, Rod Phelps and Jennie, were married. There, too, were Old Jess, Ben Slawson, Repeater Ryan, the real, Simon.

pure Garry Forsythe, and a host of others. And when repeater Ryan kissed the brides, he said :

"This is business—business—'um—umph, oh, yes!"

Jack Byreton and Gabe Best have redeemed their lost reputations and are leading honest lives. A year sufficed to remove the deposits of Silver Island, but that year made Burton and Phelps rich beyond their hopes. And they are men who deserve riches, because they love it for the good it will do, and not for itself.



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